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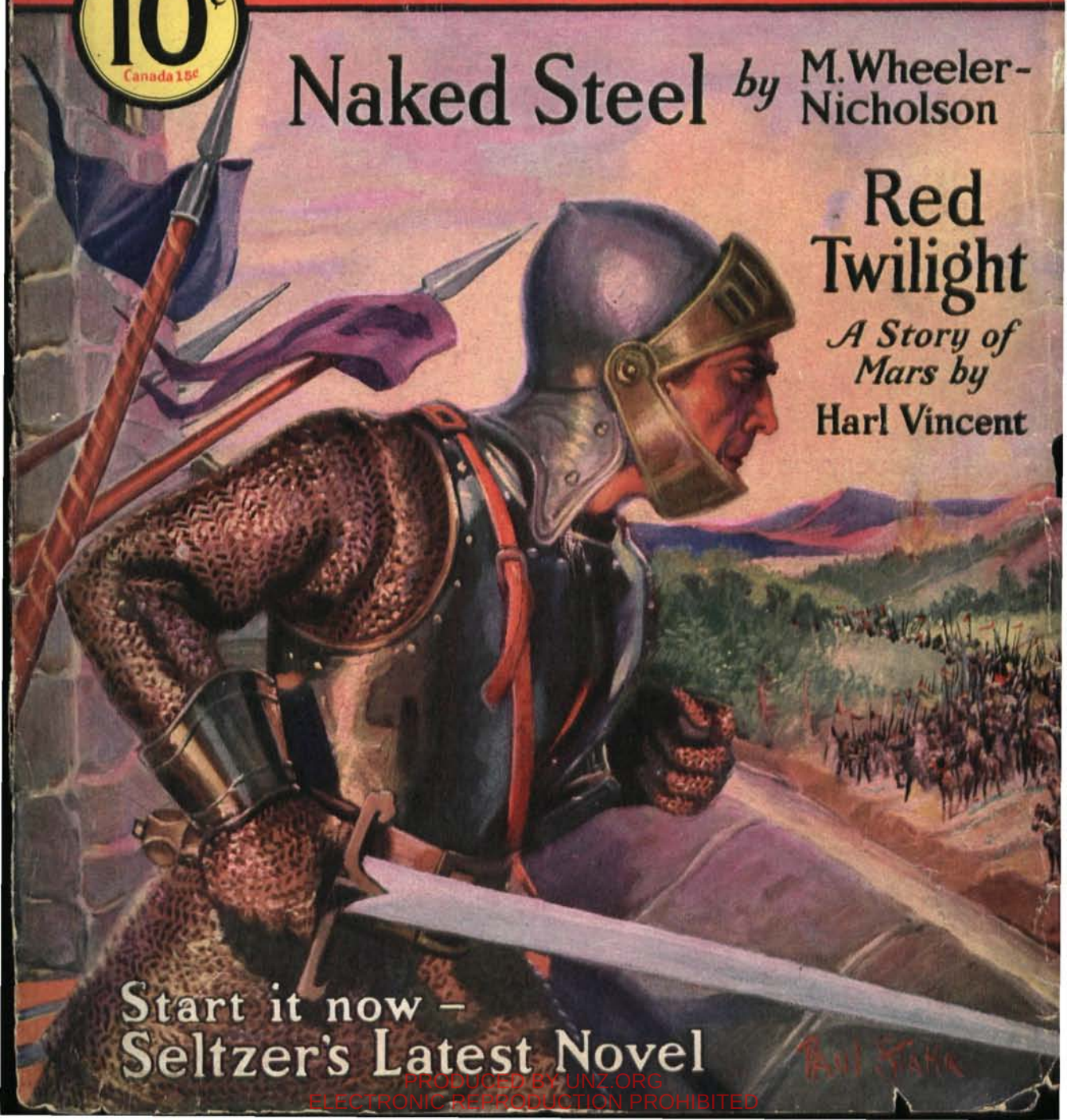

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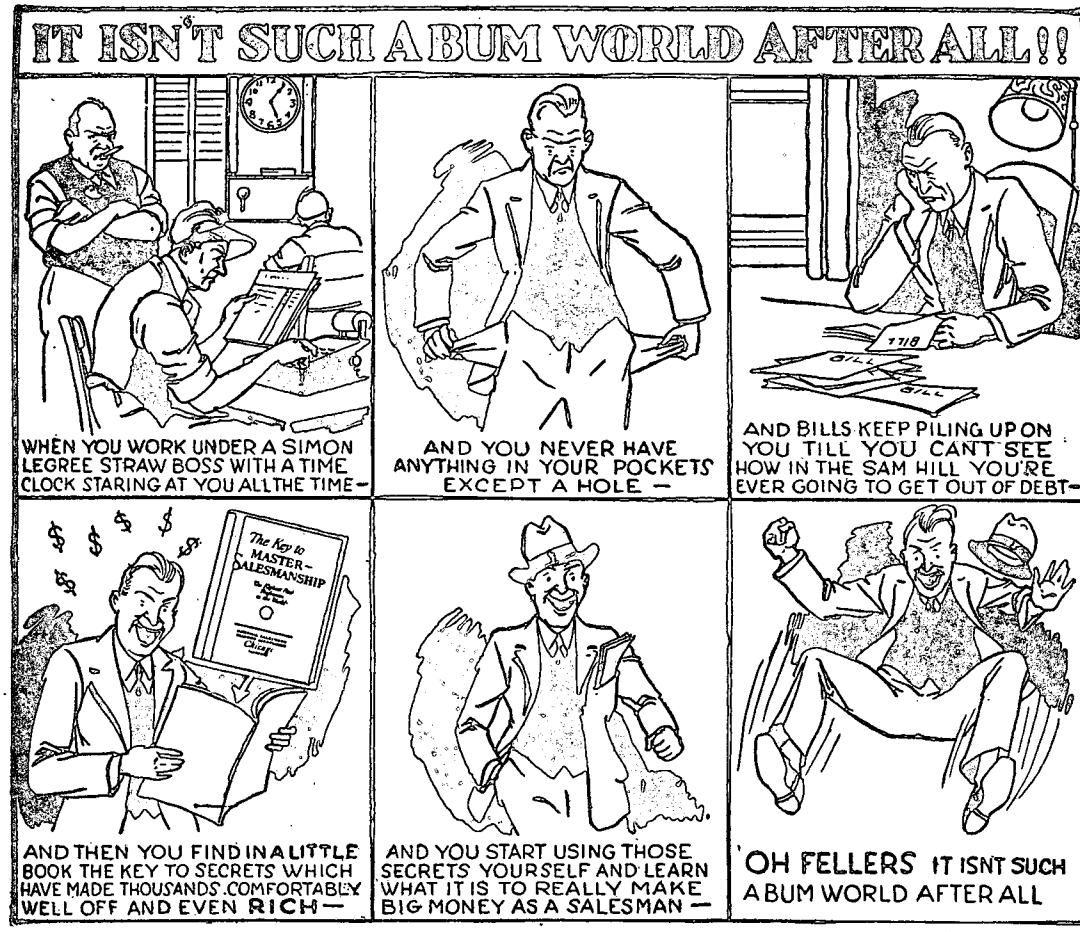
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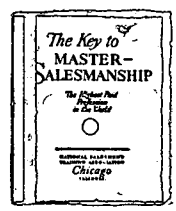

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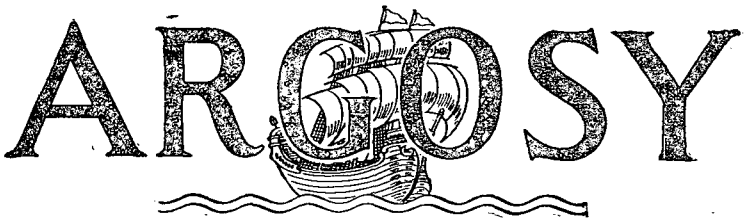

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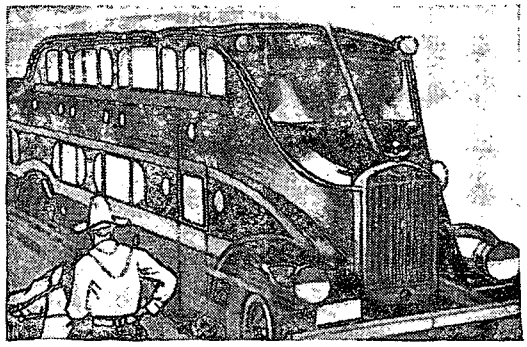

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ARGOSY

VOLUME 223 SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 1931 NUMBER 6

Excited cries rose at the little Martian chief's barked words

Red Twilight

An outlawed scientist and his adventurous friend Ford Matthews alone dared to face the truth, when blood-colored vapors hid the sun and warned of disaster to Earth

By HARL VINCENT

Author of "Beyond the Dark Nebula," etc.

CHAPTER I.

OMEN OF DISASTER.

WHEN he first noticed the change in the light, Ford Matthews blinked and made a notation on his calendar pad. Eye trouble. It was time he visited an oculist. He dismissed the matter and returned to the financial statement on his desk.

Just past thirty and looking younger, with his straight youthful body and Nordic blondness, Ford managed the

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big export business he had inherited from his father, and did a good job of it. Already he was known to Wall Street as a clever youngster who was bound to make his mark.

But this everlasting grind, this battle of wits and of dollars, was irksome. Ford had looked forward to other things when in college. An outdoor life; adventure and travel. Most of all, a fantastic but hopeful search for his long lost brother, Paul. But the sudden passing of their father had brought a change in his plans. Ford was now chained to his desk in an office whose luxurious furnishings oppressed him; where the metallic chatter of the ticker was ever in his ears. He drove himself to his tasks here within steel and granite walls that towered at the lower end of Manhattan Island. Of all places, this sparkling June Day!

He grew restless now, without knowing why. The figures danced before him in a glow like that of firelight. Ford looked up and brought his gaze to bear absent-mindedly on the spot where, but a few moments earlier, a shaft of sunlight had made dazzling golden-brown highlights and mellow shadows of the oaken panels and molding.

A mysterious alteration had come in the appearance of the rich carving; the tiny gargoyles grinned down at him maliciously, their wicked features wreathed in flame-lit haze. The shadows were deep and menacing with red mists. It seemed as if a vast conflagration flared in the heavens.

Somewhere in the outer offices a feminine scream rose hysterically and ended in a choked gasp. The door burst open and Ford's secretary entered, swaying uncertainly, with cheeks ashen and eyes staring wildly.

"Look!" she quavered, pointing. "The sun, Mr. Matthews! The sky! It's the end of the world!"

And then Miss Knowles, coolly efficient and unexcitable business woman that she was, fell forward with a shuddering moan. Catching her in his arms as she toppled, Ford stretched her limp form on a divan. The overwrought girl had fainted.

Something very much out of the ordinary had happened. Ford could hear the clamor of his employees deserting their desks in the outer offices and crowding to the exits. He rushed to the window.

The sun, an enormous ball of fire, hung there motionless, its rim aflame and dripping blood-red in a crimson haze. In the lurid half-light the waters of the harbor rippled and smoldered like the surface of a vast lava caldron. A veritable gehenna had come out of the skies to visit the proud and prosperous New York of 1962.

EIGHTY stories below, Battery Park was a restless sea of humanity. Milling, gesticulating crowds already packed the area and every face was turned skyward. The frantic screams of women and the hoarse shouts of men mingled in a terrified roar that swelled to drown out the noises of the city.

A police siren shrieked somewhere in the cañon of Broadway, and the clanging of gongs added to the din as reserves were rushed to the congested areas. The roar of a high-powered airship rose to a thunder and then trailed off into a smooth purr as a five-motored monoplane of the Meteorological Service swept past and drove off into the red mist, its bright wings appearing to drip live flame before they were swallowed up in the eerie haze.

Suddenly it was choking hot; un-

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bearable. The breath of a furnace drifted in through the open window, and it reeked of alien gases and of decay—of dead things.

Stifling, Ford stumbled to his desk and tore at the call lever of his visiphone. An interminable delay ensued before the frightened face of the operator flashed on the viewing disk. Mechanically, the girl repeated his number, and he saw that her eyes were vacant and staring. These girls stuck to their jobs through thick and thin. The crack of doom itself would not drive them from their posts.

The disk glowed anew, and Owen Wardell, most eccentric of Earth's scientists, looked out at him scowling. His lean jaw was set in grim lines, and the mop of iron-gray hair was tousled.

"Oh, it's you!" Wardell said. "Come out here right away, will you?" He was turning from the disk.

"But, Owen, wait! This crimson fog—what is it? The city is upset."

"I know," the scientist flung back. "It'll be worse later. I reported it to Washington, but those fools down there wouldn't listen, as usual." His scowl deepened and he shrugged his shoulders expressively. "Come right out, will you? I think this is the chance you've been waiting twenty years for."

The thin lips relaxed in a quick half-smile and the scientist reached for the lever of his visiphone. Ford's disk went blank. He could not summon his scientist friend to the screen again.

Galvanized into sudden activity, he dashed through the empty outer office and made his way to the street floor by way of the sole automatic elevator. The others had been forsaken by their operators. Dashing through the deserted corridor, he flung himself into the tangle of panic-stricken humans who s t r u g g l e d and fought and screeched outside the main entrance of the building.

Sweating red-lit faces were thrust into his own, then lost in the mob. Groans and wild shrieks smote his ears; curses and prayers. A woman fainted not three feet from where he was wedged in the midst of the jam, and he saw her head roll limp on her shoulders before she slid down underfoot. Some man reached to help her, was smashed aside by the mob.

Over at the subway kiosk on Bowling Green the press was thickest. A burly policeman climbed over ducking heads and heaving shoulders, scrambling to the top of the structure. He was shouting through cupped hands. Somehow his voice carried through the din.

"The subways are blocked!" he yelled. "Take side streets to the rivers. Spread out!"

Some one shrieked piercingly, an awful gurgling cry of horror.

A street urchin wriggled through from somewhere and looked up grinning in Ford's face.

"Rotten mess, ain't it, mister?" he shrilled. Then he was whisked away and flung violently against a stone wall that loomed suddenly close. There was a sickening crunch as the little bullet-shaped head struck a projecting ledge. And the scrawny body slumped down between those jostling e l b o w s and scrambling, kicking feet that were everywhere around him.

The red twilight and the bloody haze that dimmed yet revealed the more clearly, made a nightmare of it all.

FORD managed to worm his way toward the corner, pressing close to the rough b u i l d i n g wall. Knuckles skinned. It was in a bedlam of noise and of brutal struggling with

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the frenzied horde. But he must reach Bridge Street. It was his only hope of getting out of the city for many hours—if ever he got out alive. For on the flat roof of Number Ten was safely housed his autogiro plane.

A surging wave of howling humanity swept him out across the curb and into the street. A moment later he stumbled over the sidewalk on the opposite side and into Battery Park, clinging desperately to the broad shoulders of a bull-necked individual who seemed to be leading the concerted movement. And then he was lifted from his feet and carried along helpless and exhausted. It seemed that his ribs must give way under the pressure of the stampeding multitude.

The crowding eased somewhat and he regained his footing just as a great voice boomed out overhead. The huge sound amplifiers atop the Custom House were in action. This meant that an official broadcast was to be made, and the struggles and outcries of the mob stilled noticeably. It was easier breathing now.

In the red twilight the monstrous voice from the air seemed a ghastly and supernatural thing, yet it brought a semblance of order on the streets. A bulletin from the Naval Observatory, it was, that came to them in reassuring words. There was no danger to the populace in this red fog, the report ran. It was merely the passing of the entire solar system through an enormous cosmic cloud of red dust particles that partly obscured the sun and brought the mysterious crimson haze.

A great roar of relief swept up from the streets and momentarily drowned out the booming voice of the amplifiers. Hats were flung into the air and perfect strangers embraced one another gleefully.

This cosmic dust, the bulletin went on, was so fine that it would have no effect on living beings. The world was absolutely safe, and the people might go about their tasks as if nothing had happened. Astronomers would be able to report within a few hours on how long the red cloud would last. It would not be long.

The effect was magical. Laughing and crying by turn, the people who had been so thoroughly terrified, now broke up into chattering groups, who gazed into the red sky and pointed steady fingers at the crimson disk of the sun. In the weird half-light that no longer held anything of terror in its ruddy glow, the park quickly took on the appearance of a holiday.

Knowing Owen Wardell as he did, Ford was unconvinced and more than ever curious as to what the ominous red fog really was. He lost no time in getting to his autogiro.

As he waited for the elevator to the roof, he thought again of what Owen had said: "This is the chance you've been waiting twenty years for." Was it possible that their great adventure, the thing they had planned and hoped for, had come at last?

CHAPTER II.

DARK CERTAINTY.

DURING the swift trip over the Hudson and across north Jersey toward the mountains, Ford's thoughts slipped back twenty years into the past, that horrible night when Paul Matthews had gone out of the world.

As a lad of eleven, Ford had worshiped his older brother. Paul, at nineteen, was a laughing, care-free giant for whom life was a great playground.

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How well he remembered that great rocket ship, and the envious thrill that had stirred him when Paul had been given a job in one of the workshops on the huge field where it had been erected! A gleaming cylinder of steel, it stood on four massive columns and poked its blunt nose into the clouds, the wonder of the countryside and of the world at large; the cause of much heated argument in the press and in engineering circles.

In 1942, when everything had been ready for the journey to Mars, Congress had refused permission for the journey. The builders had taken the matter into the courts, and there it had stagnated.

Paul had been inconsolable at first, but gradually his old smile came back. He crept into Ford's room one night and awakened him with excited whispers. The ship would take off that very night, law or no law. And he, Paul Matthews, was to go along.

In a turmoil of delicious excitement, Ford had gone with his brother to the field. About twenty of them had entered the little manhole that was the vessel's entrance; the younger members of the group whose money and brains had gone into the construction of the rocket, and a number of mechanics, of whom Paul was one. Two or three women had been among them, wives and sweethearts of the adventurers, laughing and joking with the men as if the undertaking were no more than a pleasure trip.

The huge polished cylinder shone a monstrous ghost-shape in the moonlight. It seemed to shiver and sway.

Then the night was broken by a thunderous roar. The landscape was lighted with sudden terrifying brilliance, and the great rocket went thundering into the skies ahead of a trail of blinding magnificence, driving through the atmosphere with a deafening screech. In an awful, earth-rocking instant the light had dimmed and the roar subsided. The devilish mechanism that carried his brother was little more than a sputtering light-fleck off there amid the stars.

Astronomers had sighted the rocket and had followed its course as it sped on toward Mars. All had gone well for the first few million miles, and then had come an explosion. But the rocket had not been wrecked, and though it had lurched and spun crazily, it had continued on into Space.

People had supposed that every one on the ship was lost; but Ford had never given up hope of seeing his adored brother again. He had gladly supplied the money for Owen Wardell's attempts to build a space ship, hoping some day to reach Mars.

Below him he saw the clearing on the wooded hilltop where stood Owen Wardell's laboratory, a rambling old structure with a small dome at one end, and he dropped the little autogiro through the red twilight to an open space near by.

"I'M glad you're here!" the scientist greeted him. He ran his fingers through his hair and shook his head as he squinted up at the blood-red sun. "You heard the bulletin from Washington, I suppose? All tommyrot! A hasty piece of guess-work, given out to calm the populace."

They had entered the workshop, and Ford saw that his friend looked tired and worn when he sank into the much-used revolving chair that faced his littered desk. He was more than ever aware of the greatness of the man; of his unselfish devotion to the cause of science.

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"You think it is a serious menace to the world?" he ventured.

"I know it, Ford. In the first place, I've maintained all my life that other planets were inhabited by intelligent beings. For that I've been ridiculed by the whole scientific world. Now they will not listen when I tell them that this 'red twilight' is the direct result of certain radiations from Mars, which is now approaching conjunction with the earth—its nearest distance. But I have measured these radiations. Ford, this red twilight is a warlike move of the Martians!"

Ford stared agape. "What effect will it have?"

"I don't know. The world will find out within a few hours. You and I, Ford, are going out there and investigate. We'll make a trip to Mars and find a way to stop it, if the thing proves to be what I suspect."

"You mean," Ford demanded, "that the space ship is completed—a success? That we can do the thing we've talked about for years?"

"Positively." The scientist's eyes softened as they took in the sudden flush of excitement that mantled his young friend's cheeks. "I have taken it out beyond the stratosphere," he said, "and put it through a stiff course of sprouts. It's practical. We'll leave within an hour, if you are willing."

"Willing! But the export business—"

"There'll be no business for many a day! Look!" The scientist flipped the lever of his visiphone and called for a close-up flash of Union Square.

PICTURED in the disk was a restless multitude gazing at the sky. They jostled and shoved one another, as before. The police were everywhere in the throng, quelling as best they could the minor riots. The cheering effect of the first bulletin had worn off.

At one point a soap-box orator was haranguing a little group of listeners. Wardell adjusted the focus and tuning.

"I tell you, friends," the wild-eyed speaker was shouting, "the Judgment Day is at hand! Hark not to the pratings of these scientists who would explain the vengeance of an angry God with their talk of harmless natural phenomena!"

Some one in the crowd booed, and a general laugh went up as the speaker fought to maintain his position in the midst of the increasing press. A woman struggled to his side and, flinging her arms over her head, screamed frantic prayers to the crimson heavens. Moaning then, she collapsed and the crowd drew back, suddenly stilled and ashamed.

The speaker's voice rose anew: "It is the last trumpet we are facing, my friends, and it behooves us to make our peace—"

His voice broke off abruptly and the disk went blank as Owen flipped the lever.

"You see," the scientist groaned. "Nothing can convince them that the red twilight is harmless."

Abruptly Owen Wardell rose from his chair, to stare white-faced at a slender tube partly filled with clear liquid. Enlightenment, Ford saw, had come to his friend in that instant.

"My God, Ford, it's the water!" he whispered huskily. "They're stealing our water supply—either to destroy us, or to fill their dried-up canals! See—the level in the graduate has dropped a full cubic centimeter in the past half hour. There'll be drought and famine in the wake of this red twilight. Desperation, and death! It's the end of

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things for our world, unless we can head the devils off!"

"You mean to say, it's evaporating?"

"No, it vanishes into thin air without the slightest trace of vapor. In fact, the humidity of the atmosphere has been decreasing."

Suddenly he became active. His lean fingers ran through the papers on his desk and swiftly sorted out a number of sheafs of calculations which he stuffed in his pockets. The visiphone shrilled an insistent call, but he gave it no heed.

"Shall I answer it?" Ford asked.

"All right; but whoever it is will not hold us up now."

Ford flipped the lever. The anxious face which flashed into view was that of an astronomer at Swarthmore Observatory, Dr. John Holden.

"Wardell!" he exclaimed. "I believe you're right, after all. I find these same emanations you reported. And the water, man—it's leaving the earth. The streams will dry up, the lakes. The oceans themselves will be great arid valleys if this keeps up."

"Oh, indeed?" Wardell, too busy to give much attention to the frantic caller, was sarcastic. "So you've come to it at last, have you? Report it to Washington, John. And write a nice long article for the newspapers, too. We're going away from here."

CHAPTER III.

ACROSS THE VOID.

THE space flyer was a great double-walled egg of metal, with one end flattened to form the base. It rested in a cradle Wardell had constructed on the laboratory roof. Ford and the scientist lost no time in bolting the airlock door to its rubber seat when they had entered.

"So you discovered the secret at last!" Ford exclaimed as his eyes took in the familiar mechanisms of the control room.

"Yes. The wave forms I had been using were incorrect, though my charging frequency was of the proper value. I can now reproduce or nullify gravity as I wish, or multiply it tremendously merely by altering the charge in the motor spheres."

"And the speed?" Ford grinned as he saw the assured look that crossed his friend's face.

"The speed is ample," Wardell said soberly. Confident though he may have been of his ship, he appreciated the seriousness of their venture.

The motors purred as he threw in the starting switch, and the gentle throbbing of pumps showed that the oxygen apparatus was working.

Though Ford had looked forward to this moment for nearly twenty years, ever since his first talk with Wardell, never had he anticipated the thrill that charged him now as the vessel rocked gently and lifted from its cradle.

"Owen," he said in an awed voice, "this is the greatest achievement of man."

The scientist nodded absently, and increased the repulsive energy. Ford was pressed hard into his seat, and felt giddy. Bending over, he was able to look through the floor port at the red-lit landscape that dropped swiftly away beneath. The laboratory had already merged itself into the crimson-wooded mountains, and, off there to the east, the Hudson River was a slender ribbon of ruddy hue. A moment later it was lost in the red twilight.

Ford shivered. Everything was red

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down there, the color of blood. This thing that was happening to his world was a monstrous nightmare, from which he must soon awaken.

"Owen," he asked, "you honestly think there's a chance of our doing something?"

The scientist shrugged. "I have hopes. If we fail it will be easier to die here than in the mad inferno they will make of Earth."

FOUR hours passed. Wardell busied himself with his astronomical instruments, and with a mass of calculations that he was setting down with flying pencil.

The controls of the vessel were set to provide for maximum repulsion from Earth and for maximum attraction to Mars. There was no possibility of swerving from their course. The acceleration was terrific. Ford stole a glance at the velocity indicator. They were traveling a thousand miles a second! And yet the space ship appeared to hang motionless in the void.

Earth was a tiny red orb, all but lost in the background of brilliant light-points that were the stars. The sun, visible only from one of the bunk rooms up top, was a flaming white mass that could not be safely viewed save through semi-opaque screens.

Ford wandered through the vessel, and marveled at the care with which each item of the amazingly intricate mechanisms had been assembled.

Nearly ten years had been spent in the design, the building and rebuilding. There were thousands of parts, manufactured to Owen's specifications in dozens of factories scattered all over the world.

Atomic motors driving gravity-wave generators used ordinary scrap iron as fuel. Disintegrating the atoms of the metal and utilizing the nuclear energy, they would require only a few pounds of the almost worthless material for the present journey. Motor spheres, charged with this strange and intense energy of the purring generators, were capable of intensifying or reversing the effect of gravitation. The ship was propelled by the attraction or repulsion of the heavenly bodies. Starting with the old Einstein theory of the relation between magnetism and gravitation, Owen had worked out definite usable forces.

Ford climbed to the observation dome up on top and found his friend in a state of great excitement.

"Take a look!" The scientist indicated the eyepiece of a curious instrument attached to the lower end of the telescope.

Ford squinted through the tiny aperture and saw nothing but a weaving light-pencil of green flickering against the dark background.

"What is it?"

"The thing that's causing all the trouble. A beam of invisible vibrations, spanning the heavens in an enormous arc which reaches from Mars to Earth. Just as I suspected: the devils are stealing our water; transporting it over this ray. I made the thing visible by using a fluorescent filter-screen."

"But, Owen, I don't understand." Ford bent over to peer once more through the instrument.

Wardell shrugged. "Neither do I, quite," he admitted. "But it proves that—"

That was the last Ford heard. At that instant the slender green ray spread wide to fill his entire field of vision. With a vivid burst of light it seemed to sweep into his very eyes to strike him down. A shrill vibratory note rose high, to end in a deafening

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crash. A violent heaving of the vessel. Darkness.

WHEN consciousness returned, slowly and painfully, Ford lay for a long time desperately ill. His entire body was shaken by convulsive twitchings. The very blood in his veins seemed to rush boiling to the extremities of his limbs, to build up pressure that must surely burst through the tortured flesh. His head ached abominably. And then at last came blessed relief.

He rolled over and raised himself groggily on one elbow. Blank metallic walls rose there before his eyes, swaying drunkenly in his blurred vision. Then sudden recollection and the swift return of his normal senses. Things stabilized and he sat up quickly on the edge of the cot. He'd been stretched here in one of the sleeping cubbies of the space ship.

The gentle purr of the motor spheres came to his ears. Too gentle, it was—they were running at reduced speed. Rising up on legs that shook crazily beneath him, he rushed out into the ladder-well, calling loudly for Owen.

He found him in the control room, hunched absorbedly over the horizontal disk of a portable visiphone. A monotonous droning voice clipped off abruptly as the older man flipped the lever and swung toward him. Wardell was pale and shaken.

"What's happened, man?" Ford asked thickly.

Owen was running swift fingers over his body, pinching his still tingling flesh.

"Thank God, you've recovered!" the older man exclaimed, dropping his arms. "I feared you were done for. The Martian ray—we drifted directly into it."

"Well, it's got a kick, I'll say." Ford sat down suddenly, his knees giving way in the reaction.

"Right. You took the entire charge. Made a good ground between the telescope and the floor plates, you know. You were stiff as any corpse, paralyzed for hours." There was a suspicion of moisture in Owen's eyes.

"Must be made of tough stuff." Ford grinned. And then he was aware of a slight rocking of the vessel. It had been entirely without motion before. His eyes strayed to the floor port, and he saw a vast sea of rolling clouds beneath them.

"Why, Owen, where are we?" he exclaimed.

"That's the new cloud envelope of Mars," the scientist grunted. "Water from our own Earth. It's raining like the devil down there; I dropped through and saw."

"We're here!" Ford was incredulous. "I was out of the picture that long?"

"Nearly six hours, Ford. And we made the trip, close to forty million miles, in little more than ten."

"Ten hours!" Ford was aghast. Here was vindication of his friend's old arguments against the slow, bulky rocket ships. "What to do now?" he exclaimed in a sudden burst of enthusiasm.

"That's the question." The scientist stared gloomily through the port. "It's a big job we've undertaken. Guess I was crazy to think I could do anything in time."

Ford remembered the voice he had heard. "The visiphone," he exclaimed. "I heard it speak. Was it the Martians?"

"No." Wardell shook his head slowly. "It was the voice of one of our newscasters at home."

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"What! 'Way out here?" An awed realization of the vastness of the space that separated them from Earth crept into Ford's whispered words.

"Yes, 'way out here." Owen's voice was listless; tired. "We cannot communicate with them, of course. Our transmitter is too small. But the powerful central stations of the newscasters seem to span the distance easily. We'll know what's going on back there—only too well."

"Things are bad?"

"Bad." The scientist scowled darkly, then reached for the control levers. With a savage jerk he dropped the little vessel into the cloud bank below.

CHAPTER IV.

MARS.

OVER the surface of a vast desert land they drifted. The rain beat down in torrents on thirsty sands that soaked it up without leaving the tiniest puddle as evidence of its coming. As far as the eye could see, there was not a trace of vegetation. No living thing was in sight, nor did it seem that life ever had existed in this drab and forbidding wasteland.

"Humph!" Owen grunted. "They surely needed the rain."

"Looks as if this were the first in centuries," Ford commented. He was thinking of what the verdant fields of his own country would look like when the Martians had finished. If there were any Martians.

"Thousands of centuries, more than likely. This planet is ages older than Earth." The scientist lapsed once more into gloomy silence.

A fringe of low hills appeared at the horizon and swiftly drew near. The barren, rocky slopes showed as little promise of the presence of life as had the desert.

Ford stole a glance at his friend. It was not like Owen to crawl into his shell like this. Was it that he had despaired of success? Or had the visiphone brought to him something upsetting? Ford reached for its lever.

"Don't!" Owen snapped, observing his motion. "Leave the damn' thing alone. It makes you sick." The scientist scowled, and the gray of his eyes darkened with intense feeling. "They're feeding them the same bunk about the cosmic cloud. And they've put Holden in jail—the one man among them who has brains enough to learn the truth and who dares to tell it. The fools aren't worth saving."

So that was it! Ford chuckled, relieved in mind. Even in this crisis, in the face of the astounding thing he had accomplished in bridging the unthinkable distance between the two planets, the old feud rankled in Wardell's breast. He never would forget his differences with the accepted authorities of the scientific world.

"Wait until we return," Ford remarked solemnly. "They'll have to change their minds when the thing is done."

"I'll never go back!" the embittered man snarled.

He stared glowering through the floor port. Suddenly his face lighted and he extended a shaking forefinger.

"Look, Ford, look! One of the canals, and a village."

It was true. The canal, if it could be called such, was a deep gully no less than a mile in width and extending an unbroken straight line in both directions to the horizon. A tiny stream of water that was almost lost in the huge ditch wandered aimlessly over its uneven bottom. This great cut had

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been planned by intelligent beings and carved across the surface of the planet in past ages by dexterous hands and ponderous machines.

Sprawling along the crumbling rock-walled side of the canal was a village of conical huts, seemingly constructed of uncut stone and mortar. The streets were mere paths connecting the scattered dwellings and running off into the oasis of stunted purple brush that lay alongside.

"Not much engineering ability displayed by the inhabitants of this town!" Owen snorted, dropping the vessel for a closer view.

The rain had ceased falling and the clouds were clearing away. The sun shone out weakly, casting long hazy shadows of the conical huts on the steaming ground. There was an eerie, greenish tint to the sky where it showed through rifts in the scurrying clouds.

AT first it seemed that the village was deserted. And then when the sun, which was much smaller than when viewed from the Earth, came into full view just above the horizon, several squat figures emerged from the huts and gathered together in a circular open space near the canal bank. They stood erect, like humans, but on spindly legs that seemed incapable of supporting their chunky bodies. They were clothed from neck to knees in some shimmering material that was fitted closely around the skinny thighs and bloused around the middle.

Their skin, where it was exposed, was white. Not like that of the white race of Earth, but of a sickly pallor like the bleached bones of a skeleton. Somehow, these curious beings struck him as pitiful things.

"Seem to be rather frail, don't they?" Ford remarked.

"You never can tell." Owen had left the ship hovering and was bringing a pair of automatic pistols and a handful of loaded clips. "We'll be prepared for them anyway, if they show fight."

He swung the vessel down over the village now and opened the thick glass door of the floor port. There was a swish as the air rushed out to equalize with the lower pressure of the Martian atmosphere. And a puff of rank vapor drifted in from the steaming brush-land beside the canal.

"Hi, there!" the scientist yelled, when they were within fifty feet of the ground. "Look up, will you?"

Startled, the queer creatures craned their short necks skyward. Their open mouths and round, staring eyes could be seen as black splotches against the cadaverous pallor of their broad faces. And then with one accord they scattered and ran to their separate dwellings, where they ducked in through the low doorways.

"Either they're scared out of their wits, or they've gone for weapons," Ford observed, reaching for one of his automatics.

"Neither, I think. See, they're returning—swarms of them."

Hundreds of the gnome-like creatures scurried into the streets, running toward the gathering place over which the space ship hovered. Shouting in thin, querulous voices as they ran, waving their thin arms aloft, with palms spread wide to show they were unarmed.

"Game little devils," Owen said. "Don't seem a bit frightened, though our vessel must seem like a supernatural monster to them. I'm surprised they're not down on their knees."

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"It looks as though they had been expecting us," Ford pointed out.

Owen was thoughtful as he dropped the space ship to within a few feet of the ground in the center of the gathering place where the Martians were assembling.

Chattering in their own outlandish tongue, these undersized beings of another world spread out into a circle completely surrounding the ship of the skies that poised in their midst. One, obviously a leader among them, made bold to step out in the clear space and stand directly beneath the open floor port.

He tossed back his long mane of glistening black hair with a human-like gesture and gazed up at the two Earthmen with shining eyes. In the depths of his wide black optics there was a gleam of friendliness, and his lips opened in a smile of welcome.

"COME down, you Merkans," he called out then in clipped English that brought astonished exclamations from the lips of the Earthmen. "Come down to Tos-kir. Make talk with Neet. We friends."

Ford gripped his friend's arm until it made him wince.

"Did you get that, Owen? He speaks our language! Called us Merkans — Americans! Do you suppose—"

"It must be." Owen rubbed his biceps ruefully. "That rocket wasn't lost twenty years ago. They got it going again in some way; managed to reverse and land here. I've always believed you might find your brother here." Owen wrinkled his brow in thought as he dropped the ship softly to the purple sward. "Don't raise your hopes too high, though. Something is off color about this."

"You mean Neet is lying; that they plan treachery?"

"I think they're honest. But these little fellows are not the only inhabitants. Why, they haven't the knowledge or ability to steal Earth's water! Who then can be doing it but the scientists of that first expedition?" He shook his head. "I feel sure that Earthmen are at the bottom of this. It looks bad to me."

How well they were to recall those words in the dark days to come!

GINGERLY they stepped forth on Martian soil, tottering uncertainly because of the lesser gravity. Their weight here was but little more than a third of what it had been on Earth.

The air was cold and crisp as on a mountain top; but the vapors that rose from the steaming sward reeked of dry rot.

"Say nothing about the rains," Owen warned, when Neet, smiling broadly, advanced to them with hands outstretched, "Have to watch our step until we find out a few things." Ford nodded understanding.

The Martian who spoke broken English raised his voice in a few shrill syllables of his own tongue, and the pressing crowd quieted and drew back respectfully. With his barrel-like chest swelling proudly and his head thrown back that he might look up into their faces from his scant five feet of stature, he addressed the Earthmen:

"Neet glad you come, men from green star. All Tos-kir glad. You stop here for food and for night of sleep?"

There was something pathetic in his childlike eagerness and in the dignity of his pose. Ford turned questioning eyes on the scientist.

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"I am afraid not," Wardell replied, shaking his head gravely. "We thank you, Neet, and wish to thank your people. But we must go to your king or emperor without delay."

"K i n g ? Emper—what?" Neet's smiling countenance lengthened in puzzled disappointment.

"We wish to see your ruler, the most important personage in your land," Owen explained patiently. "We have tidings from the green star, and must convey them to the great man of this country."

"Ah-h! Bahspahl!" Neet's s m i l e returned. "He greatest in all our world. Neet show you way."

"Is it far?" Ford asked, noting the Martian's swift frightened look in the direction of the space ship.

"Two light-time, one night, if walk," he returned. "Very quick in chariot of air."

"You will guide us there?" Owen questioned him.

"In chariot?" Neet's wide stare was one of mingled apprehension and exultant daring.

"Yes. It is perfectly safe."

"Neet have no fear. Neet come with you." The little fellow drew himself up in swift pride and turned to his people, snapping out short Martian words with all the precise intonation of a drill sergeant.

The effect was magical. The dwarf-folk of Tos-kir set up a cry of lament, their hands u p r a i s e d to whatever strange gods they might have. Then, at a further barked command of Neet's, they dispersed quickly and made off for their homes.

Neet turned on the Earthmen, grinning wide.

"They not know," he explained. "They fear Neet return no more. But Neet know. Know men from green star carry him to Thren-dis. Not harm."

"Nervy little cuss," Ford whispered in his friend's ear. Neet walked straight to the entrance manhole of the ship, looking neither to the left nor right, and clambered inside.

"You bet," Owen agreed enthusiastically, "I'll wager his knees are weaker than yours were, that first time you went up with me in one of the old helicopters."

"Oh, shut up!" good-naturedly. "I was a green kid then."

"Green around the gills!" Owen laughed. Their good spirits had returned, though they knew the greatest dangers were still to come.

NEET maintained a white-lipped silence for many minutes after the ship left the ground. He had indicated that they must follow the canal for a space in the direction of the setting sun. And then he clung fast to his seat while they accelerated.

The Earthmen studiously averted their eyes as he struggled with his fears. This mortal terror that came to so many when first they left the ground was a horrible thing.

The shadows below were lengthening as they skimmed swiftly over the rim of the great canal. Above them the sky deepened to an emerald hue. Owen muttered something about an analysis he intended to make of this thin air. Some element that must be present in large quantities was responsible for the green of the heavens.

They saw that the stream at the bottom of the canal had swollen from the rains. Though still shallow, it was a sizable river now.

A larger village slipped past down there, and a city. They shot up to five thousand feet to pass over a mesa that

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thrust its sheer chalky walls up from the plain before them.

And then they saw it. A low-lying metal structure atop the mesa. Four immense latticed towers, and a network of gleaming metallic ribbon that stretched between.

"See that?" Owen whispered.

"That rain machine," Neet spoke up, rousing from his lethargy and speaking swiftly as a man does when trying to forget his fears. "Make rain first time to-day. Bahspahl work on it ten, twelve years; promise what it do. We not believe before. Now, all Tiron give thanks to ancient gods. Tiron give water to her people again. Food, health, flowers and birds—all will come back as in long ago."

"Tiron?" Ford gasped. But he knew; in a flash of revelation he had seen what this thing meant to the queer, likable dwarf-folk.

"Ah, I forget," Neet was saying. "You call Mars. We say Tiron. Tiron saved now. Bahspahl do it. He great man of Tiron. Most powerful."

Ford's startled and comprehending gaze locked with Owen's there in the failing light that shone in through the ports.

CHAPTER V.

GOD OF MARS.

BEYOND the mesa the great canal ended in a huge circular reservoir from which other canals radiated like spokes from the hub of a gigantic wheel. Fully five miles across and shaped like a bowl, its curved bottom was turbulent with the waters that poured in from the great ditches. Muddy, the swirling torrent lapped viciously at the crumbled stone which lined the man-made crater.

Neet squealed in delight.

"See, friends!" he chortled. "It is the beginning of a new age to Tiron. Is it not a miracle, the new water?"

"Hm," Ford grunted, looking longingly at the silent black case of the visiphone. It was a miracle here, no doubt of that. But on Earth, a catastrophe.

It was queer that the rain had abated. Had they abandoned the project? Or was it that—but, of course, Mars was simply turning on its axis in the same manner as Earth. Its day was about an hour longer, that was all, and the projector was no longer on the side facing the green star.

On the morrow it would operate again, and the green star would be no longer green, but red. Fear-ridden and despairing, the people would collect on the streets in the red twilight. Day after day this would go on, until Earth was a parched and dried-out thing. Shriveled, cloudless, bereft of all life. Unless—

"Thren-dis!" Neet exclaimed.

They had swept over a ridge of straggling hills. A broad valley of luxuriant cultivated land spread before their astonished gaze. In the center of the checkerboard of carefully tended fields, there rose the tapered spires of a great city. Outlined sharply in its bleached whiteness, it stood out against the dusky blue and purple of the surrounding farmlands, a dream city.

There was a wide central square evenly planted to purplish shrubbery and laid out with broad walks. Fronting on it was an ornate, flat-roofed building of many stories. Earth minds had conceived that edifice in the Renaissance style; an architecture utterly foreign here, among the tapering piles of the Martians.

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Ford drew in his breath sharply.

"No doubt about the expedition, Owen," he said. "They've done all this. It's new and orderly. Not like the towns and villages of the natives, nor like the ancient ruins we saw along the canal."

"Yes. And see! There are electric street lamps." Wardell was as excited as Ford.

The green dusk had closed in on them, and innumerable light-points flashed into being along the ordered streets. The great central structure—a palace, it seemed—showed glazed windows suddenly alight with warm radiance from within. Homelike; welcoming.

Ford's throat constricted. It was indeed a far cry to Earth, to the things and people he cherished. Perhaps he would never see them again.

WHITE faces were upturned in the square when the space ship settled softly to the pavement. An excited hubbub greeted them. Chattering Martians pressed in close, their gestures friendly. Smiles were welcoming. But Ford's hand closed over the cold butt of the automatic Owen thrust forward, and he tucked it safely in his breast pocket.

Neet, his chest puffed out and his voice raised high, was trying to force a way for them through the crowd. But the people of Thren-dis gave no heed. He was an outlander; a simple-minded villager of the drylands. And they were intensely curious; they wanted to see these oddly-garbed visitors from the green star at close range. Their slim white fingers stretched forth to stroke the leathern jackets.

Pushing good-naturedly and wriggling their way in with sharp elbows prodding, they hemmed in the Earthmen. Ford thought grimly of the scene in Battery Park after the appearance of the red twilight.

An uncouth metallic clangor rose then in the square, and the elfin faces drew back, sobered instantly. The shrill cries of the gnome-folk were stilled to throaty gurgles of disappointment as two towering figures stalked across the pavement from the palace steps.

Human-like machines of glittering metal, these seven-foot monsters that strode through the shrinking multitude—robots! Their massive iron feet clanged resoundingly on the flagstones, and shining, cable-like arms waved back the crowd. Dome-shaped heads surmounted the cylindrical bodies, with small black disks for mouths and twin lenses for eyes. Expressionless, diabolical things of tremendous power.

"Machine-men of Bahspahl," Neet shrilled. "They not harm. They take us to Square House. Bahspahl control them by voice through the air. He see through their eyes."

The little Martian looked up at them bravely, but there was something of anxiety, something of uncertain terror in his round black eyes.

One of the robots drew near and a raucous voice issued from the tiny black disk there in its domed head.

"You will come to the Boss," it rasped. "He requests it." A many-jointed metallic tentacle-arm stretched forth, wrapping its slim end around Ford's wrist.

"Let go of me, you iron devil!" Ford yelled, reaching for his pistol.

The metal coil relaxed slightly and the radio voice spoke again.

"There is no cause for alarm, men from the skies. It is only that the Boss wishes to talk with you. Will you come?"

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"What do you think we intended to do?" Ford growled. These big robots with their staring glass eyes gave him the creeps; they were a loathsome and entirely unwelcome reception committee of this Boss, whoever he might be.

"Easy now, Ford," Owen begged. "Everything seems to be all right. It's only the strangeness of these metal creatures."

The two robots stood passive; waiting. Each turned its staring lenses on an Earthman, entirely ignoring the small figure of Neet, who danced excitedly between their huge bulks. Their every expression was being watched on a viewing plate somewhere in the big house, Ford knew.

"We'll go in," he growled finally.

The tentacle slipped from his wrist and he breathed easier. But his fingers held fast to the pistol-butt as they followed the robots toward the broad steps of Square House, as Neet had termed it. The crowd drew back to a respectful distance, but their willing guide from Tos-kir hurried after them!

A fine state of affairs. Owen must be right. These Earthmen who had come over in the rocket ship might not want them here. The Boss; they were to see the Boss. The designation had an ominous sound, somehow. Bahspahl. The Boss. Boss Paul! Could it be that brother of his?

They slipped through the entrance and the great bronze gates clanged shut behind them, leaving Neet outside. The courageous little Martian had been hopelessly outdistanced.

A GREAT blond giant of a man stood facing them across a shining table top in the large room to which they had been conducted by the robots. His iron henchmen had retired to stand motionless at the door.

The Boss's keen blue eyes regarded them unsmilingly; the muscles of his huge chest were tensed with some emotion deep within, where they lay revealed by the skin-tightness of his silken shirt. A heavy, slightly sandy beard hid the expression of lips and jaw, lending a look of savage ferocity. He might have been a Viking of old.

Ford was not surprised to see how much Paul had changed in twenty years; for he had not expected his brother to be the same. Ford stepped forward, his face alight and pulses racing. But the quick scowl and booming voice of this strange brother of his stopped him in his tracks.

"You two are from Earth," the Viking roared; "did you come alone, or are there others?"

"We came alone," Owen replied, with a warning look in Ford's direction, a signal for silence. He was afraid of Ford's impetuosity. The younger man drew back.

"Why did you come?" the giant demanded.

"There were two reasons," Owen returned. "First, there was the matter of the red twilight. Second, we hoped to find trace of a group of scientific men and adventurers who left Earth in a rocket ship some twenty years ago." He smiled guilelessly at his interrogator.

"I see"—with a grunt. "Well, I was one of those rocket travelers. But, what do you mean by the red twilight?"

Owen Wardell cleared his throat. "You have a huge ray projector out there on a mesa, turned on the Earth. You are stealing our water for use on Mars."

"You have found that out, eh? Well, I am. I intend to keep on until we have enough. What has this to do with your

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red twilight?" The blond giant was unmoved; merely curious.

"A crimson haze accompanies the action of your ray. The Earth populace is in terror; there is rioting and killing. You are an Earthman—don't you realize what this is doing to your own kind?" There was bitter contempt in Wardell's voice.

The Viking gave an unfeeling laugh. Ford stared at him in amazement. Was this the fine brother whose memory had haunted him?

Owen's tone lowered a little. "If this ray of yours keeps on, a drought is coming down there on Earth such as history has never recorded. There will be famine and death; the horrible torment of maddening thirst. Can you, a man of Earth, bring down this catastrophe on your own race?"

"What about the Martians, the people among whom I have lived these twenty years?" The Viking's voice was terrible. "It is to prevent their annihilation I am doing this. Earth can divide her water with us. What do I care for them? I was never one of them; they cast me off."

"Paul!" Ford shouted, bringing the giant up short.

"You call me Paul?" the big man said in an awed voice.

"Paul Matthews! Don't you remember me? I am Ford, your own brother." He looked at the glittering blue eyes of the giant for recognition, but saw none. "You are Paul, aren't you?" he demanded.

The big man softened then.

"Yes. I am Paul Matthews." A big paw closed down over Ford's hand, gripping it tight. "It all seems so long ago."

Owen's face was still hard, but he spoke more quietly.

"Paul Matthews, you are bringing sure death to your own kin. Your brother and I ask, in the name of the human race, that you shut off the ray projector."

The giant shrugged, and growled: "I won't discuss it to-day. That is final."

It was not wise to press him, the scientist decided.

"So be it. If there's another room I can use, I'll leave you with your brother."

"Sure, come along!" said Paul almost cordially. "I'll be right back, Ford," he tossed over his shoulder. His voice trailed away.

Ford drew back into the room and stared fascinated at the silent, immovable robots.

WHAT power Paul had attained! Strange, though, that he had not been more friendly. He evidently didn't feel the same thrill in the reunion that Ford had. He had been almost ill at ease—furtive, calculating; it didn't fit in with his hard-boiled manner at all. Ford could not down the idea that some ghastly secret was preying on Paul's mind.

Where were the others, those bold spirits who had defied the government and set off in the rocket ship? Surely they were not all dead!

Paul had been the youngest of the lot, but there were plenty of husky fellows among them.

Bahspahl! A name with which to conjure, here on Mars. A god he was, almost, to the dwarf-folk of Tiron.

The eerie stillness of the place oppressed Ford, and the unseeing eyes of the robots' squat headpieces. He turned his back to them, moving over to the table.

Under its transparent covering was a color photograph of a startlingly

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beautiful woman of perhaps forty. Beautiful but dangerous. Her eyes were those of a tigress—fierce and compelling in their intense stare.

Something clanged behind him and he wheeled about swiftly to face one of the robots, which had moved from the door. There was cold blue light deep in those lenses of eyes. They were not unseeing now!

Ford's automatic roared deafeningly and one of the lenses crashed in, leaving a jagged hole gaping in the smooth metal of the headpiece. A rasping screech came from the black disk beneath, and the flexible steel arms of the thing were around Ford, crushing his own arms to his sides. He cried out, faint with the pain.

"Paul! Owen!"

The black disk rasped, chuckling hideously. Ford's helplessly wriggling body was raised high and he looked down into a yawning pit which had opened at the robot's feet. A great chunk of the smooth floor had silently dropped away. Inside, all was blackness.

Ford's breath was shut off; his ribs cracking with the constriction of those awful metal tentacles. His vision blurred. And then the pressure was suddenly released; he was tumbled headlong through the open trap-door.

Half conscious, he plunged down into the blackness; squirming. Above him, a raucous laugh—metallic, yet horribly human. Gloating.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

Bush Doctors

BEAUTIFUL but serpent-haunted, St. Lucia in the British West Indies offers fertile tracts of land for sale at attractive prices. But no one will buy them for fear of the terrible *fer de lance,* whose bite means an agonizing death within a short space of time. There is no cure for a *fer de lance* bite except immediate amputation of a bitten member. Local bush doctors, however, possess remedies for the bites of other less venomous serpents. Often these native bush doctors are successful in their treatments, which consist of using a series of ligatures and rubbing the wounds with herbs unknown to civilized medicine.

It is locally believed that a bush doctor, if well paid by a patient, will call to him the very snake which did the biting. The snake is then killed and exhibited to the patron as evidence of the bush doctor's magic. But the bush doctor—like other medicos—can kill as well as cure. The credulous say that he can send a snake to bite a person whom he wishes to destroy, and that he can send a snake into a house to steal jewelry or anything else that a serpent might carry in his mouth.

Another feature of the bush doctor's trade is the curing of bites inflicted by humans. Women of the lower classes frequently bite other people when fighting with them. Then the bitten person calls in the bush doctor who not only heals the wounds, but, every one believes, causes the teeth of the biter to drop out.

C. A. Freeman.

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He thrust something long and hard against the man's back

Hack Ride

Taxi driver Stitch Dwyer knew his New York—Broadway and underworld alike; but he needed more than knowledge when he took the Big Shot for a ride

By WILLIAM CORCORAN

STITCH DWYER rolled his Scarlet Tanager taxicab gently along the curb to a precise spot ten feet from the canopied Seventh Avenue entrance of the sporty Hotel Alhambra. He shut off the motor, sat back, and grinned. The imposing young functionary in gold braid and robin's egg blue looked at Stitch, set his military cap at a slightly more jaunty angle with the tips of white-gloved fingers, and grinned back.

"Morning, admiral," said Stitch. "How's business?"

"Booming," said the taxi starter. "The big boy's in town."

"The big boy? Hands Starbeau?"

"In the flesh, cowboy. And he's scattering sawbucks right and left." The starter drew a small wad of five and ten dollar bills from his pocket and flashed it before the driver's avid eyes. Then he came closer, to lean toward the cab.

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"You might get a break, kid," he said confidentially. "Hands always pours himself out of the hotel around this time of the day and heads for a bar. The bookings is slow just now. You might land him, with luck."

"Him and what else?" Stitch countered skeptically. "A little spraying with a Tommy gun, maybe?"

The other instantly donned an air of superior dignity as he might a cloak. He shrugged. "If Hands Starbeau ever asked himself that question he'd still be fighting prelims at the local clubs."

"One of these days that might seem a pretty good idea," said Stitch dryly.

The starter looked at him. "Where did you get all the tall millinery, boy? You hacking for pleasure these days or for the money? Besides, whose funeral is it?"

"I'd rather not be along when they find that out," said Stitch with a quick grin. "And I'm still behind a wheel for the money it brings, such as it is. I got to meet a two hundred dollar payment on the rig to-morrow, and only a hundred and a half in the sock. Money? Man, you don't know!" He looked at the starter and said resignedly, "Heck, bring on your machine guns. I got an insurance premium due soon, too. Maybe I won't have to pay that."

The starter shrugged a shrug that was eloquent with aloofness from such sordid details. Stitch watched him in wry humor as he strolled back to his post. That guy was plenty on the strut. Feeling superior even to machine guns this morning. What marvels a little easy money performed—took dopes like this and made them kings for a day, swaggering over domains that ran in size from a sand lot to a city. Well, the Thompson gun was a great invention. It put out kings the way the fire department put out fires: by turning on the pressure. Short and sweet.

Stitch Dwyer did not disdain money. He had too abiding a need for it. The payment on his expensive Scarlet Tanager cab must somehow be met to-morrow, and Stitch had every intention of acquiring the necessary balance by one means or another. His plans were vague and beset with limitations, and the limitations were four: one swell wife and three grand kids.

They often came to mind when Stitch tossed a half dollar into a hat Fridays at the garage, contributing toward the maintenance of Tom Murchison's storm-tossed family. Tom Murchison had gone careless some months back in a small matter of secondhand, though unused, tires. He would be out again, with good behavior, in eleven months. Stitch had no wish to set up a Dwyer family hat alongside the Murchison.

Stitch was not careless. He worked and watched his chances and kept his conscience from growing either too hard or too elastic, and he let no dollar slip that was fairly within his grasp.

A RATHER stunning young woman sauntered out of the hotel entrance beneath the canopy. She was blond and vividly handsome, and she wore a dark blue tailored suit with a white fox collar. She looked pleased with herself and in no hurry whatever. Stitch watched her, alert to move.

The starter blew a whistle blast loud enough to summon a cab ten blocks away. Stitch rolled the Tanager forward. He allowed no disappointment over Starbeau to disturb him. Women were hard ones to read, but this one

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might be a generous rider. It was all in the game.

The starter relayed the orders to Stitch, and as he did so he winked with urgent significance. Stitch only understood the spoken message, "Move up and park for a while; the lady wishes to wait."

Stitch moved the taxi a dozen feet clear of the hotel entrance, then looked back in wonder at the now aloof starter. Something was up, but there was no explanation.

The young woman leaned forward from her seat in the cab. "Big boy," she said in a voice assured and brittle and clear, "I want a match."

Stitch looked at her as he pulled out a pack of matches and handed them through the window. She was as smooth and full of class as Dresden china—and hard as diamonds. Knew what she wanted, and was accustomed to getting it on demand. She smiled at him, and he grinned back. They understood each other. They were both out for what they could get, and each was comfortably aware that there was precious little to be had from the other.

The mid-morning spring sun made the city radiant all about them; it gleamed brightly on the starter's gilded magnificence, and he surveyed the avenue, northward as far as Central Park, southward toward Times Square, with complacent awareness of his value in the decorative scheme.

It was an opulent scene, a panorama of toplofty hotels and apartments, expensive shops, and very swank automobiles. It afforded a smooth and polished front for the activities which went on with much less ostentation along water fronts and narrow, darkened streets, and which in greater part supported it.

Here was the realm of the big-shot racketeer: a latter-day Field of the Cloth of Gold which no amount of sunlight ever rendered the less shady.

Stitch Dwyer quickly concentrated on his job as a man issued from the hotel at a lope and headed for the cab, the starter leaping to open the door before him. A glance identified the man. Stitch had glimpsed him before. Hands Starbeau.

Young, hard, handsome, well tailored, powerful. Inevitably sinister, yet inevitably likable in a forthright, lusty way. The hands that had gained him his nickname were characteristic: beautifully shaped, but brutally enormous and strong. Dark tales were whispered of things he had done with those hands.

Starbeau made plenty of money in many devious ways, and he feared nothing, which was fortunate, for actually he had much to fear just now. It was common gossip in the papers that his extinction was due as soon as his enraged rivals could get the jump on him. So far, despite several attempts, they had failed. He was a strange man, Hands Starbeau, foolhardy yet shrewd, ruthless yet sentimental.

Stitch Dwyer knew he was in luck to have Starbeau for a fare. What kind of luck, remained to be seen. Good or bad, it would scarcely be mediocre—it would be good or bad with a bang.

Starbeau flung himself into the cab and sat back with a groan. "Get going!" he roared. "Goddlemighty, if I don't get a whisky sour inside me—Roll your hoop there, skipper. Forty-seventh, west of Broadway."

"Why don't you stop with me at Tony's?" suggested the woman. "I'm in no hurry."

"*I* am, sweetheart," he told her,

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"—to get rid of you. Scram! I got things to do."

The woman was not offended. "My, your temper's sweet, mornings!"

"There's only one woman in ten," he said emphatically, "that should be seen in the morning. And she should be seen and not heard."

"Really?" She smiled. "What about the other nine?"

"They oughtn't even be alive!" He groaned again. "Jeez, I'm telling you if that wasn't mange cure and carbolic I drank last night—"

"You *would* drink it, darling!" she reminded him. She continued to smile with amused malice. He made not so much as a dent in her armor. Listening, Stitch Dwyer nodded to himself in admiration of her prowess.

THE address on Forty-seventh Street was a small hotel catering to a transient, semitheatrical trade. There was no doorman. Stitch jumped from the seat and held open the cab door himself. Somewhat to his surprise, Hands Starbeau emerged first, hangover and all, and escorted the girl to the entrance.

There was mockery and something close to sarcasm in the farewell Hands bestowed upon the young woman. And just perceptible in her eyes was faint surprise and calculation, veiled behind smiling good nature. Starbeau held her hand and bowed, his hat swept low, his voice suddenly gentle, his sufferings for the moment forgotten.

She was now anxious to go inside. "I'll expect you to call me later then?" she said.

"Sure as shooting, sweetheart."

"I'll be waiting," she added.

"I suppose you will, darling."

She attempted to withdraw her hand. "Don't forget, sugar!"

Hands maintained his grip. "Not for the world," he told her, grinning. "But you forgot something. You didn't tell me where I could find you."

"Why—" she said, taken off her guard. "Where do you think? Here, of course."

"Oh, no, honey." His voice was soft, his eyes bright and hard. "No, you won't—not with all that money to move out on. Suppose you fork over that wallet so I can be sure to find you here."

She looked at him steadily, a half smile on her face. Their eyes met for a moment without wavering. Then she shrugged slightly, amusedly, and opened her purse. She took out a pocket bill fold of pin seal. It bulged with treasury notes. She held it out to Hands, and there was a mocking, unabashed light in her blue eyes.

Hands chuckled as he stowed the bill fold safely away. "Next time, look out for the mirrors in a strange room before trying that, darling," he advised her. "I learned that playing cards."

"I'll remember," she said.

"So long, baby. I had a good time. I'll give you a ring some day."

And he was back in the cab with a dive, roaring fluently profane orders to the driver. Stitch Dwyer took off immediately with eyebrows elevated in pleasure—nay, in delight.

Their destination was a speakeasy on Fifty-fourth Street. It was a little old brownstone house with blind windows and a lattice gate in the areaway. The gate was wide open, and Hands hastened inside, leaving orders for Stitch to wait. The orders were welcome: the longer the ride, the larger the reward. Stitch had been won over to approval of this ride, and he tried to estimate the big man's probable generosity.

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Fifty bucks—that was the goal. A lot of money, even though the day was young. Far too much ever to be earned by straight hacking. Riders had fixed in their minds the curious idea that a ride with many stops was somehow much more laborious than an equally long ride with but a single stop. They always tipped lavishly on such occasions. And Hands Starbeau, so far as the meter went, was just another rider in the day's work. Fifty bucks. Well, Stitch would get it some way if he had to stay on the street the round of the clock.

A MAN came out of the speakeasy and paused in the areaway to light a cigar. He stepped to the sidewalk and looked up the street, then down the street, then idly at his cigar. He advanced to the cab and stared over the cigar at Stitch. He was a lean, lantern-jawed man with a cold, dark eye.

"Where'd you pick up the ride?" the man demanded.

"What ride? Who?"

"Hands."

Stitch paused warily. "My orders didn't include talking," he told the man. "Why don't you ask Hands himself?"

"I did," the man replied surprisingly. "But Hands is riding high. He's on a bender, and this ain't the time for it. He won't listen to reason. You been places with him?"

Stitch shook his head reassuringly. "Picked him up at his hotel. Him and some babe of his. Dropped the girl and come here. That's all I know."

"I see," said the man. He stared at Stitch appraisingly. "There's things liable to happen any minute to-day. I'm giving you a steer. Don't you drink with him. Keep your eyes open. Head him away from the speaks. Stick by him till he's among his own boys."

"Oh, yeah?" said Stitch. He paused. "I don't especially want this job anyway, brother."

"Yes, you do."

"I don't think so. In fact—"

"Think twice, friend," the man said softly.

Stitch followed the suggestion. It seemed wise. "Things" could happen, did happen every day, even to lowly taxi drivers. Besides, there was the money.

"Well," said Stitch, "if you feel that way about it!"

"I don't feel no way," the man snarled softly. "I'm telling *you* how to feel."

"O. K.!" agreed Stitch quietly, returning the other's stare.

The man flicked an ash from the cigar, grunted, then turned about and strolled back into the speakeasy.

When Hands Starbeau came out half an hour later he had successfully rid himself of the hangover. He was in a rolling, jovial mood; he was all the world's big brother, albeit a reckless and embarrassing relative to have around. He plucked open the cab door with one bone-crushing hand, then paused to thrust his large, square-jawed face into the driver's compartment and fix Stitch with his icy-blue gaze.

"How much gas you got, skipper?" he roared.

"Tank full," said Stitch.

"You'll need it," Starbeau assured him, grinning. "Give her the gun. Up Broadway and to the devil with the cops. We're going places." He launched himself into the taxi and the door closed with a thunderous slam.

Stitch left the curb with a most satisfactory roar of exhaust and a sprint-

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er's start. The last he saw of the speakeasy was a cold, hard eye in the doorway giving them a darkly significant stare just above a glowing cigar.

Starbeau was right. They went places. And then on to more places. They stopped at a bank while Hands obtained additional cash. The wallet now bulged like a Christmas turkey. Stitch gulped to think of its contents, and of his need on the morrow. Then he passed through a moment of severe illness as he thought of the added dynamite in the wallet. If anybody were to corner Hands Starbeau to-day, he'd have a rich haul. That guy with the cigar had no need to advise Stitch how to feel. He was only human and fully attuned to his problem.

But shining like a dark star before him was the thought—fifty bucks! Fifty bucks to go, and ten grand at least in the cab behind him. Stitch Dwyer shot his cab through the droning traffic like a comet through the Milky Way.

THEY visited a real estate office on north Manhattan which had every appearance of doing no real estate business whatever, and thriving on it.

They called briefly at a warehouse on the Harlem River near One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street.

They visited a lawyer's office close by the Bronx County Courthouse.

And constantly they visited speakeasies. There seemed to be one always within two minutes' drive from whatever spot they happened to occupy at the moment Starbeau was overtaken with a thirst. It was at one of these that their flying tour of the city came to a brief pause. And it was here that Stitch was given a real hint of the seriousness of his job.

Stitch was invited inside for a drink, but he declined. At each such stop a similar invitation had been offered and declined. Stitch felt safer outside. Starbeau certainly knew the interiors of these places better than he, but no one knew the streets before them better than Stitch. He settled into the seat behind the idle motor and gave himself over to a scrutiny of the scene about and periodic glances at the clicking taximeter. The latter already had passed four dollars and was pleasant to contemplate.

They were in a mean neighborhood of coal yards and produce houses and dingy tenements. People of unintelligible tongues crowded the sidewalks, their lusty offspring racing among stolid peasant legs. There were only a few other vehicles on the cobble-paved block.

A dapper youth emerged suddenly from the speakeasy, which was no more than a cheap barroom with a tiny tobacco shop in front for a blind. The young man glanced quickly up and down the street, then set out at a fast walk for the distant corner. There was a definiteness of purpose in his gait that caused Stitch to frown as he watched.

Then Stitch observed a second man also watching. The second man was a middle-aged, worried-looking South European with a rolled-up apron about his middle. He remained in the speakeasy doorway as though fearful of being seen by the departing patron. Stitch bent his attention on this second figure.

The second man abruptly gathered courage and hastened to the taxi. He leaned within. "You with Hands Starbeau?" he asked. "Please, you come and get him. You take him away fast."

"I'm with him," said Stitch, "but

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he ain't with me. I can't do anything. What's the matter?"

"That fellow," said the proprietor, worriedly, indicating the disappearing young man. "You know? Hands is alone. He should not be alone. I don't want him in my place alone."

A slight shiver traveled down Stitch Dwyer's spine. He shot a glance at the young man's swiftly vanishing back. The purposefulness in that hasty stride became purely sinister. Stitch moved in the seat.

"You get along inside," he curtly told the older man. "I'll be in after you. I'll see what I can do."

The older man scuttled apprehensively back to his bar.

STITCH found Hands Starbeau rolling dice on the bar with a pair of suave, genial men whose somewhat flashily expensive appearance was at odds with the poverty of these surroundings. He was all a-grin and very much at home, and he was winning. He wielded the five dice in the cup like a pitcher warming up.

"Come on, you Indian dice!" pleaded Hands—or perhaps commanded. He rolled them and yelled, "Four threes in one! A leg apiece and a roll to go. Come on, you box cars. Any fives tie." He threw the dice again and exulted, "Five in two and a tie! Horse and horse and one flop takes the money. I follow my roll." He churned the dice in the leather cup, praying for luck.

The others watched, quietly amused, unperturbed. Hands spun the little cubes down the length of the bar with a grunt of expectation. Eyes swiftly assayed the throw. Starbeau smacked the bar with a mighty palm.

"Five sixes in one!" he roared in exultation. "Freight train on a clear track. Beat that if you can!"

The opponent made his throw, a hopeless one, and lost; and Hands beamed and picked up the money on the bar. He ordered drinks and advised the others to bring their rabbits' feet along next time. Then he suddenly noticed Stitch. He gave an inquiring look, glass half raised to his lips.

"The girl's getting impatient, boss," Stitch quietly told him.

"Yeah?" said Hands. His eyes probed Stitch, but neither his voice nor his face betrayed mystification. "What the devil about?"

"Said she's tired sitting in the cab, waiting. Wants you to come on."

Hands grunted a loud disgust with women's ways, looked at his drink, then tossed it down. He flung a bill on the bar for the drinks, slapped one of the gamblers on the back in hearty farewell, and walked out of the room belligerently—fully determined, by all the signs, to raise a little trouble with his impatient, if mythical, companion. Stitch quietly followed.

Starbeau restrained his curiosity until Stitch Dwyer had raced the taxi out of the neighborhood. Then he sat forward on the folding seat with his head through the window and demanded explanation.

"The boss of the joint tipped me off, that's all," said Stitch. "A guy pulled out just after you went in. He was on his way to rat on you."

"What d'you know about guys ratting on me?" Starbeau asked suspiciously.

"Heck, I read the papers!" said Stitch.

Hands grunted sourly. "O. K.," he said. "I knew something was up and I couldn't inquire for details in there. Anyway, I was due to pull out. Those boys were set to rim me. The cards are my dish, but the bones I never had

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any business touching." He ruminated for a moment. Suddenly he ordered, "Pull up at that drug store ahead. I got some phoning to do."

Stitch left the cab and strolled into the drug store while Hands was in a booth telephoning. He bought a pack of cigarettes and then lighted one leisurely close by the booth. Hands's voice rose in the latter part of the conversation and was clearly audible.

"The devil I will!" he roared. "Who's running things, you or me? I took care of myself when you were snatching apples . . . What do I care? That rotten bunch of bog-trotters won't overtake me till I pass out of old age." He listened for a long minute, then added decisively, "Listen, bozo. You'll wait and you'll like it, see? Never mind where I am. Go on back to your dominoes and I'll be along when I'm good and ready. So long!"

He slammed down the receiver and burst forth, leaving the phone booth rocking on its foundations. "Come on, skipper," he ordered. "We ain't half started yet."

Stitch followed him outside with a resigned sense of the inevitable.

HANDS STARBEAU seemed very successfully to be combining business and pleasure. For an interval they stopped at obscure establishments uptown where Hands made plunging entry and roaring departure, wasting no time. Starbeau's heavy cargo of liquor began to show on him, for all his enormous strength, and there came a slight glaze on his eyes and an occasional thickness in his rapid-fire speech. But his vitality, though no longer so well directed, failed to diminish.

They completed their business uptown, and then drove to the lower end of Manhattan Island. Their destination was hard by the great transatlantic piers on the West Side. Stitch judged from the peace within the cab during the ride down town that their tour of the city was nearing its end.

He took a route that led him down Broadway to Times Square, and from thence on down Seventh Avenue. A few blocks below Sheridan Square in Greenwich Village he slowed for a right turn, stopped, then cut a course around the dead traffic, which was halted by the control lights.

The traffic officer on post at the crossing waved clearance for him. As the cab turned into the street, Stitch leaned out and raised a hand in salute. The policeman grinned in genial reply and called, "How's the hacking, Stitch?"

Then the taxi was in the cross street and Stitch sent it speeding toward the Hudson.

The address he sought proved to be an ancient tenement building in an advanced stage of decay. At least so it was in appearance. But a second glance revealed that while every window was dark and dust-lined, there were a number of small but active ventilator fans twirling inconspicuously on the front of the building. And Hands Starbeau's ready admittance, when he rang the bell in the small area, proved it anything but deserted.

Stitch Dwyer sat back in the seat with an uneasy feeling. He took out a cigarette. He glanced at the meter. The face now registered nine dollars and eighty cents. They had been rolling for hours, mile after mile. Hunger stirred in Stitch. Worry stirred in him.

The clock ticked on imperturbably by his ear, but Stitch Dwyer was far from comfortable. And he could in no way account for that feeling of im-

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pending disaster, so much like the staring of an invisible, unblinking eye.

Then all at once Stitch was fully aware of the cause. It rested in a car parked against the curb farther along the street. It was a heavy, dark sedan, powerful and fast. The sedan faced west, whereas Stitch had turned the Scarlet Tanager about to head toward Seventh Avenue. In the sedan were four men, silent, immobile, watching.

They watched no one definite object; they observed everything. Next Stitch discovered that they were not actually silent; that they talked with each other in curt, tense syllables out of hard, motionless lips.

There was nothing to indicate who they were or what absorbed them so. But Stitch needed nothing. He sat still, staring through narrowed eyelids, his face expressionless. Beside him, the taximeter gave a small complacent *chung!* and the figures read ten dollars, even money!

Ten dollars; forty bucks to go. And on the quiet street, four grim, hard men in a fast black sedan. The hackles of Stitch Dwyer came erect, and a cold, unearthly wind blew over his soul.

ONE of the four got out of the sedan. He was short, heavy, dark. He stood for a second beside the car, then walked across the street toward the house with the black dusty windows. His gaze rested on cab and driver, and the pupils were like polished black marble. For a moment the eyes hovered, then went elsewhere. The man walked to the old house and stepped into the areaway.

Stitch stirred in the seat. He took out a cigarette, dropped it, and retrieved it. He came out of the compartment awkwardly, b a c k w a r d, stretched as he stood erect, and consulted his watch. He wound the stem a little, put the watch away, tossed the cigarette into the gutter, and walked to the areaway where the man stood awaiting a response to the ring on the bell. The iron grille gate to the place was out of sight of the black sedan.

Stitch walked up to the short man, thrust against the man's back something long and hard that was concealed in his coat pocket, and spoke curtly. "Hold everything, you rat. One move and you take it in the spine."

The man gave a sharp start, then gained immediate control. He betrayed no further surprise. He turned his head to look into Dwyer's face with a gaze of infinite hate.

"You'll take it in every bone in your body, mug!"

Stitch Dwyer's left hand snapped upward and struck the man across the face. The man stepped backward with a quick intake of breath. Stitch pressed after him, boring into his body with the long hard object gripped in his coat pocket.

"My turn now, rat," he snarled. "Play up or you get it. Where d'you keep the heat?"

Stitch ran his left hand over the man's body. He found a blunt .45 automatic in a shoulder holster and confiscated it. There was no other weapon. Stitch slid the automatic into his left coat pocket and held it there, trained on the man; he withdrew his right hand.

"You and I are asking for Hands Starbeau," he told the man. "When he comes out we're walking with him to my cab. If anything is turned loose, you get it first. Get that?"

The man's face was a choked red. He was forced to nod acknowledgment.

"All right," said Stitch. "Here

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comes the guy. Don't forget to say your piece."

The short man spoke his piece as directed, when the portly doorman of this elaborately disguised resort peered through the grille. The latter promptly drew the gate open, but the pair in the area declined to enter.

"Tell Starbeau to come out a minute," the short man said. "We'll wait."

The guardian of the door hastened off to deliver the message. They waited. Presently they could hear Starbeau's voice inside, raised in loud inquiry. Dissatisfied with the information furnished, Hands finally agreed to obey the summons. He loomed out of the darkness in the entry hall on rolling gait and peered at his visitors. Neither Stitch nor the short man spoke.

"Harry!" Starbeau said sharply in recognition. His gaze was befogged, his coördinations ragged; he was drunk. Uncertainty visited him. He betrayed no fear whatever, but he was unable to command the situation.

"What d'you want?" he demanded. "What's the devil's up?" He stared a moment, then r o a r e d suddenly, "Talk, damn you! What d'you want?"

Stitch sent his glance roving all about. Then smoothly he withdrew the .45 and presented it so that it covered both the short man and Starbeau.

"Come out of there, Hands," he ordered. "This lad just probably can't talk. We're pulling out of here."

The meaning clicked a second too late in Starbeau's brain. He began an abortive move for his own gun; but he was not so far gone in liquor as to misread the circumstances. Stitch had the drop. Starbeau did not touch his weapon. He stared at the two with red eyes for a long moment, and then as the automatic waved gently in insistence, he stalked out of the doorway. Within, the portly guardian of the gate was revealed in a paralyzed state of terror.

"TAKE it easy!" Stitch snapped at both his prisoners. To the short man he added, "Follow my play, rat."

The short man followed the play. The three of them sauntered out of the area into full view of the black sedan. Hands Starbeau, sullen, viciously submissive for the moment, went first. Command of his faculties was returning, restored by the shock of danger, more severe than a cold plunge.

The short man followed, and Stitch walked close. No one said a word. The sinister gaze of the three in the sedan was like something that reached out and touched them. They crossed the sidewalk to the cab. Hands Starbeau shot a hot, calculating glance at Stitch. Stitch winked.

"Get in there, Starbeau—fast!" he said. "And don't pull your gat as you go. You'll have better use for it later."

Several things clicked rapidly this time in Starbeau's brain. The quick wink. The fact that his driver had not taken his gun from him. The fact that he was pretty drunk. Hands dived into the cab.

Up the street a suspicious watcher was emerging from the dark sedan. Stitch came close to the short, heavy man. He looked at him and took a deep breath, his lips compressing thinly. Then Stitch's body suddenly pivoted, his right fist flashed up to clip the heavy man cleanly on the button—and he completed the body swing by diving headlong for the driver's seat of the cab. Stitch was behind the wheel before the short heavy man, who had

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not uttered a sound, hit the sidewalk. The Scarlet Tanager leaped from the curb with a throbbing thunder of exhaust. Nothing barred the way; it tore with smoking tires up the street toward Seventh Avenue. The driver of the black sedan was in frantic motion, getting his heavy car started. The Scarlet Tanager flew past the sedan.

Hands Starbeau was shouting through the window. "I see the play now, kid! For God's sake, get out of here! They carry Thompsons!"

The Scarlet Tanager was close to the avenue. South and north the traffic rolled along; south and north the control lights shone green for clearance. Against the Tanager a red eye glowed, denying movement.

Behind them the black sedan climbed sidewalks as it swung about in the narrow street, engine roaring.

Like a torpedo taking to water the Scarlet Tanager shot out from the street into the busy avenue. It careened through an instant snarl of traffic which formed to an accompaniment of shrieking brakes and yells of indignation. By a miracle no collision followed. The cop on duty whirled to investigate the sudden alarm. Stitch forced a clear path to the cop's side. The officer was purple of face.

"What the devil?" he demanded furiously. "Stitch, you fool—"

"Give me a pinch, Steve," said Stitch, curtly. "Get me out of here. Jump on. Let's get going."

The cop stared.

"A pinch? Go where?"

"To the house, Steve. You're pulling me in, get me? If you don't want it—"

"Well, I'll be damned!" said the cop. His eyes hardened. "Heck, if that's what you want, you've got it! Get going."

He stepped on the running board. Furiously he waved the bewildered snarl of traffic to disperse from their path. The Tanager throbbed and moved.

And at the crossing, blocked by a jam of vehicles, the black sedan panted in frustration while within the car three wrathy men cursed to the heavens with all the inventiveness they could summon. In front of the house with the blind windows the short heavy man was picking himself up from the sidewalk in a staggering daze.

THE Scarlet Tanager came to a stop in a quiet block sufficiently far from the scene of the disturbance. There Stitch Dwyer convened a council of war—or better, of peace. He opened negotiations by surrendering to the policeman the gangster's .45 automatic in his left coat pocket. Simultaneously he also relieved his right hand pocket of its weighty burden: a short, heavy monkey wrench which he threw among the other tools in a compartment beneath the driver's seat. He introduced his passenger to the officer, and a load was lifted from his mind as Starbeau took the cue and played a genial, conciliatory rôle.

It took some little time and a lively inventiveness of imagination, but the affair was finally explained to the cop's satisfaction. The offense was slight, after all, and the cab's passenger no man to monkey with. If the cop could have pinned a real felony on the racketeer, he would have done so with keen joy. To involve him in a simple misdemeanor was to invite useless trouble. A token from the bulging wallet helped, and the officer went his way, grinning, and wishing them luck.

Stitch and Hands Starbeau stared at each other when they were alone.

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"Well," said Stitch, "had enough?"

"Holy jumping Hannah!" exploded Starbeau. "I don't know yet what all was going on, but I'm satisfied. I don't feel so good." He held out one huge hand and looked at it. The hand was palpably shaking. "All right, I had enough," he stated with finality. "Get me a drink and take me where I belong."

Their pause for restoratives was brief and uneventful. Starbeau drank deeply and quickly and bought a bottle to take along. He gave Stitch an address and settled back with the bottle.

Their destination proved a little surprising to Stitch. It was a brownstone private house on the West Side positively reeking with respectability. It was located midway on a sleepy street of similar small houses.

Within the cab Starbeau was asleep. Stitch opened the door and gripped his arm.

"The ride's over, Hands," said Stitch. "I'm leaving you here. Your pals are waiting for you."

"Nerts!" mumbled Starbeau. "Heck with them!" But he began to organize himself for locomotion.

Stitch found it necessary to enter the cab to assist. He did so very willingly after sizing up the situation with narrowed eyes. He wore a hard, shrewd smile as he helped. Together they were struggling to force an exit when a tense, threatening voice smote their ears.

"What's the matter here? Hands—damn you, you're drunk!"

STARBEAU abandoned everything and stared belligerently at the newcomer in the cab door. "Who says so?"

The newcomer, a sleek, husky, dark man with an air of command, was in no mood to humor his associate. "I say so. And I got plenty more to say besides. Get in the house before the whole neighborhood sees you."

"Huh!" grunted Starbeau indignantly. It was an inadequate reply, and he seemed to realize it. "Huh!" he repeated—but resumed his efforts to climb outside.

Two quick, silent aides darted out of the brownstone house on the dark man's signal, and they pounced on the staggering racketeer. They knew their business, and despite his protests, rushed him effectively off his feet and into the entrance of the dwelling. The dark man watched the process with satisfaction, and then briskly followed.

Stitch had kept himself in the background, wary and watchful. Now he stepped after the dark man. "How about the fare, fellow?" he inquired. "The clock reads eleven seventy. Who's settling?"

In the house doorway the dark man whirled on the hackman. His eyes blazed. "You got yours. Hands never rode yet that he didn't put out plenty in advance. Beat it."

"Oh, no," said Stitch evenly. "I didn't get a cent in advance. He didn't have his money on him when he hired me. Ask him."

The dark man grinned an evil grin. "You chiseler!" he snarled. "Trying to clip a little extra off a lush, eh? You ought to know what you're up against, mug. Get away from here or you'll get smacked!"

Stitch licked dry lips. "I want my money. I rode him half the day."

The dark man looked over his shoulder as if minded to call his efficient assistants. He decided against it, glared at Stitch a second, and settled the dispute by the simple expedient of stepping inside and quickly slamming the

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door. It was a reply of stunning finality.

Stitch stared at the door for a long moment. It was a heavy door, and not a sound came from inside. It was, in view of all that had happened that day, a sinister and evil door. There was no hope anywhere on its blank exterior.

Stitch Dwyer walked to his cab with slow, uncertain steps. He looked up and down the block. Only the distant nursemaid and charge were in sight. He looked up at the windows of the quiet house. They were blank, aloof, forbidding.

FOR some time Stitch sat on his seat behind the wheel, staring ahead and thinking. Once or twice he looked uncertainly at the silent house. At length he made up his mind.

His mouth was set in firm, determined lines as he snapped the lever into speed and shot away from the spot.

Stitch drove through the heavy afternoon traffic for twenty blocks. His purpose was very clear in mind. He drove with all his customary assurance —perhaps even a little more. He encountered an acquaintance from the home garage and answered his salute with a genial hail. He grinned at the traffic cops as he passed. He made a stop at last on a busy block near the midtown section, and he was whistling cheerfully as he got out.

There was a cigar and stationery shop on the corner. Stitch entered and bought a strong manila envelope such as is used for shipping valuable documents by registered mail. He borrowed pen and ink from the proprietor of the shop and retired to the privacy of a rear corner. There he addressed the envelope:

H. STARBEAU, Esquire,
Hotel Alhambra,
New York City.

Drying the wet ink with a blotter, Stitch next drew from his pocket a bulging bill fold of pin seal leather. He opened the purse on the counter. A veritable fortune swelled and spilled itself before his eyes. The notes were mostly of the hundred-dollar denomination, and there was also a little sheaf of crisp one-thousand-dollar bills.

With a grin of satisfaction that envy could not spoil, Stitch finally inserted the empty wallet into the manila envelope. He ruffled the money judiciously, and abstracted a single fifty-dollar bill. He gazed at it admiringly. Then the fifty-dollar bill went deep into Stitch's own pocket beside his personal store of cash. The remainder of Hands Starbeau's roll went into the manila envelope with the wallet.

Briskly Stitch Dwyer licked the flap and sealed the envelope. He negotiated another loan with the gaping shopkeeper, and dropped hot sealing wax over the flap. It was ready for deposit in the registered mails. Stitch thanked the proprietor and walked out.

Down the street several loaded trucks were backed before a branch U. S. Post Office. Stitch walked toward it. Over the Hudson the sun was beginning to sink into the west. Along the sidewalks people were hastening homeward. The day's work was done and, with its worries fended off till another sun, the city relaxed.

Stitch Dwyer whistled in cheerful contentedness with the world as he strode through the doors of the busy post office.

THE END.

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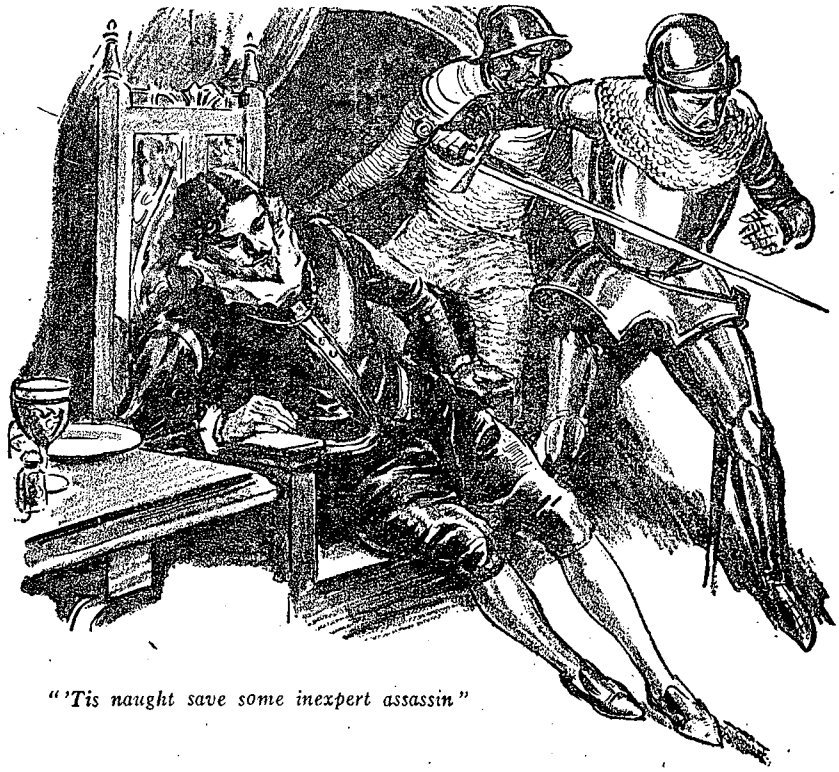

"'Tis naught save some inexpert assassin"

Naked Steel

Rafael Colonna could see the assassin hidden behind his back, but no man in feudal Italy was sharp enough to foresee all the fiendish plots of his enemies, the Borgias

By MALCOLM WHEELER-NICHOLSON

Author of "The Dagger of Doom," "The Battle of the Silent Men," etc.

Novelette—Complete

CHAPTER I.

THE ASSASSIN.

"'TWERE wiser, Messer Assassin, did you keep your boot tip from showing underneath the hanging!" Rafael Colonna's voice broke the silence in the tower room. Naught stirred, save mayhap a faint movement behind the arras of the Flemish tapestry which bordered the far side of the chamber.

If it was to this point that Rafael Colonna's voice was directed, it was more than passing strange, for the young knight sat with his back to the wall, lounging easily in his suit of black velvet with its doublet slashed with cloth-of-gold. No armor had he nor any weapon save an ivory handled dagger slung at his waist, a dagger which even now he had used to carve the joint of mutton before him on the small table. With some daintiness he

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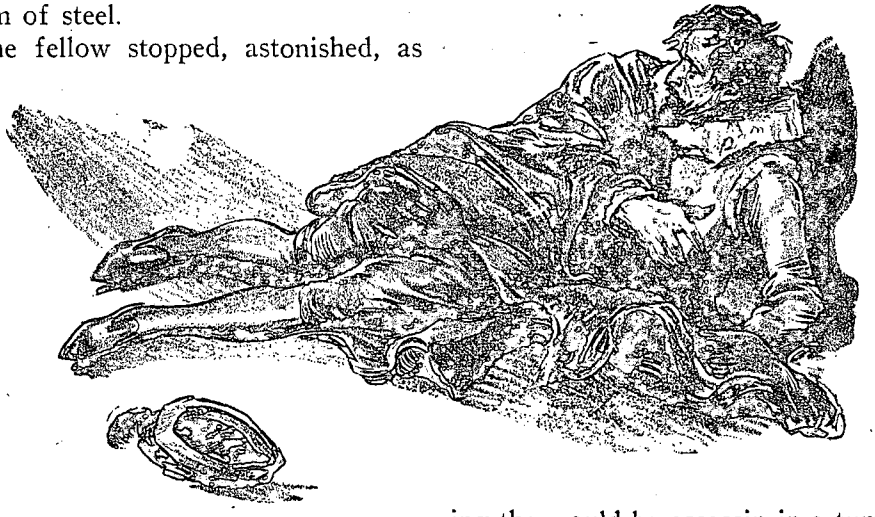
wiped the dagger blade and returned it to its sheath, his mien careless and unalarmed.

"Now 'tis better," he spoke aloud once more. "The boot tips no longer show, Messer Assassin, and there is naught to disclose thy presence save a slight bulge in the tapestry about where thy right hand would be . . ."

Behind Rafael Colonna's back, on the far side of the room, the tapestry was pushed aside of a sudden, disclosing a man whose hat was well down over his eyes and whose gray serge cloak was draped about his left arm and shoulder, leaving his right arm free. From his right hand came the gleam of steel.

The fellow stopped, astonished, as



Rafael Colonna spoke again: "Aye, 'twas wiser in you to have shown yourself," he said; and the stranger marveled that a man sitting back to him could so accurately tell every move he made.

So astonished was the fellow that he stood there, the dagger poised uncertainly in his hand, as he stared at the back of the man across the room. It was then that the fellow saw his image reflected in the burnished steel of a cuirass hanging against the wall, and understood how his every move was evident to the man with his back to him.

"Much wiser," continued Rafael Colonna, "that you remain where you now stand. Another step in my direction and a cross-bow bolt will sink itself in your body. Look, Messer Assassin, at the doorway!"

The man in the gray cloak swung about to face this new danger and saw, too late, the ruse. For Rafael Colonna had risen with the swiftness of a lithe leopard and leaped at him, barehanded, striking the dagger from the fellow's hand and tripping him up, flinging the would-be assassin in a tumbled heap on the floor.

This done, Rafael Colonna calmly wiped his hands on a square of silk and resumed his place at the table, turning his chair so as to gaze upon the huddled figure on the floor.

"Who art thou and whence are you come?" he asked.

"Mercy, my lord, mercy!" begged the man, groaning from the grip of those powerful hands and the smash against the tessellated flooring.

There was a clang of metal and a

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thud of footsteps at the doorway, and a steel and scarlet clad man-at-arms, bearing a great sword, came hurrying in, staring from the figure on the floor to his lord seated so calmly in the chair.

"'Tis naught, Galdo," said Rafael Colonna, "naught save some inexpert assassin who hath bungled his task. Remain at the doorway the while I question him."

The huge man-at-arms did as he was bidden, casting many a glance behind him as he made his way to the portal, where he took up position, being shortly joined there by a second man-at-arms, clad and armed in like fashion.

"I am curious to know who hath sent thee," said Rafael Colonna to the huddled figure on the floor, but ceased on a sudden his questioning at sound of a hurried footstep on the stair. In another second there came into the tower chamber a tall, saturnine-faced man, his features disfigured by a scar extending from his left eye to the point of his chin. He was clad in the steel and scarlet of Lady Yolanda's bodyguard, being no less a person in fact than Carlo Febbri, the captain of the guard.

"MY lord," he saluted breathlessly, "I fear evil hath befallen my Lady Yolanda! Even now some of our men of her escort come straggling back along the road by yon woods."

He pointed out the window, casting a puzzled glance at the man in gray on the floor.

"Look to that one a moment!" commanded Rafael Colonna, and stepped briskly to the embrasure where he looked out, staring down at the roofs and walls of the town below and out along the road that led to Florence, toward which Lady Yolanda, the ruler of this Italian city-state, had traveled only a few hours gone, accompanied by an escort of twenty-four lances. It was as Carlo Febbri had said. There, straggling out of the woods and making their way slowly toward the city gates, rode a dispirited couple of mounted men-at-arms, half fainting in the saddle, to judge by their wearied pose.

Rafael Colonna spun about, his face white.

"Some ill hath overtaken Lady Yolanda," he said. "I was a fool to have permitted her to go alone with such small escort. Learn this, Carlo, never let a woman cozen you against your better judgment."

"'Twere a pity if aught happened to her ladyship on the eve of her marriage to you, my lord," said Carlo Febbri soberly, recalling the great love that had grown up betwixt this Rafael Colonna and the Lady Yolanda.

"But who could have attacked her escort?" cried Rafael Colonna, walking rapidly back and forth, the man in gray on the floor forgotten. "We have made a truce with Cesare Borgia and won respite from him!"

Who else might it not be, he might well have asked, seeing that at this period Italy was divided into warring city-states, each ruled by feudal noblemen constantly at war, one with the other, so that not even Rome itself was safe, what with the Orsini, the Colonna and the Borgia families at constant feud.

True, the Borgia had won a temporary victory by the election of the Borgia Cardinal to the Papacy and had harried the Romagna, where Cesare Borgia, made captain general of the Church, was intent upon carving out a heritage for himself and his family.

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There was war all over Italy, war carried on by feudal leaders who hired French, Italian, Spanish and Swiss mercenaries to do the fighting, so that the country was flooded with roving bands of *condottieri,* robbing and slaying and pillaging where they listed.

"Hath the Lady Yolanda any possible enemies save Malatesta?" asked Rafael Colonna.

"None, my lord, but he is enough." The old captain coughed behind his hand and went on: "It is common knowledge that Ascanio Malatesta hath long desired to wed Lady Yolanda, both to secure her own fair person and to have her territories added to his," explained Carlo.

"Even so—" Rafael on a sudden ceased his striding and halted above the still huddled figure of the would-be assassin, "and you," he touched the man with the tip of his boot, "who are you and who hath sent you? 'Tis an inept assassin, Carlo," he explained, "whom I overcame these few minutes agone. Answer me, fellow, ere I have thee haled forth and put to the torture!"

"Mercy, my lord, mercy," pleaded the man, shaking and frightened.

"Small mercy ye would have shown me had I not overcome you in time. Answer me forthwith, who hath sent you—art hired by Cesare Borgia? Nay? By whom then? By Ascanio Malatesta?"

The fellow hung his head.

"Ho, it is then as thou hast said, Carlo," said Rafael. "Belike our friend Malatesta hath attacked Lady Yolanda's escort and abducted her. Know you aught of that?" thundered Rafael to the captive.

The fellow gave answer tremblingly.

"Aye, my lord, it is even so," he mumbled.

"Throw this fellow into the cells," commanded Rafael. "Send me those fugitive lances of ours as soon as they arrive at the gates—order out every man-at-arms in the citadel, mounted and ready to fare forth. I will ride at once to Lady Yolanda's rescue. Praise Heaven, we have a truce with Cesare Borgia and he can do us no harm for the nonce . . ."

The words were scarce out of his mouth when there came a stumbling step into the room and a white-faced man-at-arms halted in the doorway.

"My lord, I have to report that Cesare Borgia's forces have broken the truce, have joined forces with Malatesta and are even now moving against the city and castle!"

CHAPTER II.

A KNIGHT RIDES FORTH.

RAFAEL COLONNA'S face did not show by a single quiver the concern that this bad news caused him. Malatesta alone was a powerful enough antagonist to make the issue of combat doubtful, but Malatesta and Cesare Borgia in alliance were a staggering force with which to reckon.

Rafael cursed the moment that he had allowed Lady Yolanda to depart for Florence, leaving him in charge and responsible for the safety of her town and castle. And now she was captured by this same Malatesta. Rafael's duty was clear. He must set immediately about her rescue.

There came to him a pale and wounded man-at-arms, one of the survivors of the ambuscade wherein Lady Yolanda had been captured. His story was simple enough, and Rafael pictured the scene in his mind's eye as the man talked.

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He recalled the sight of the Lady Yolanda, sitting her palfrey, her slender figure clad in a traveling cloak of violet silk, her delicately carved features aglow with happiness as she set forth with four and twenty men-at-arms in scarlet and steel, riding two by two, before and behind her.

It was a gay cavalcade as it wound along, serpent fashion, its steel glittering in and out of the forest road, the cheerful voices of the men-at-arms echoing back from the trees and no thought of ill in any one's mind.

Some two leagues from the castle they had ridden in this fashion and were entering a forest glade that dipped down into a heavily wooded glade. No sunlight penetrated into this place, so dense was the growth, and men's voices grew hushed in the silence of the place.

That silence was broken by Lady Yolanda's scream as two men, clad in black and orange surcoats, and steel morions, rose up from behind a fallen tree, crossbows in their hands, and let fly two bolts at the leading horsemen. So close was the range that the two tumbled incontinent from their saddles. Then the forest became alive with menace.

Every tree and bush spewed forth its quota of armed men, clad in that same black and orange; the forest resounded to the shouts of the attackers and the screams of the wounded and dying, cross bows twanged and the steel bolts thudded and clanged against breastplate and helmet.

The handful of unhurt men remaining alive after that first swift onslaught crowded around Lady Yolanda, fighting desperately with sword and battle-ax against the swarms of footmen who assailed them with halberds and ten-foot pikes.

Lady Yolanda gazed piteously about her in her plight, seeing her men stabbed and hacked and dragged from the saddles by the halberd hooks of the footmen. Raising her eyes she saw the leader of these attackers, a huge figure of a man mounted upon a raw-boned roan, a man who wore the outward insignia of knighthood, being clothed from head to boot-tip in damascened steel.

HIS huge frame was o'erlaid with fat and his jowls hung down in great creases after the manner of an ox. His mouth was full-lipped and sensual looking and his blue eyes uncommon cold and piglike. The Lady Yolanda's heart fell as she recognized her neighbor, Ascanio Malatesta, Tyrant of Sanrovere and Lord of the Castle of the Black Bull. Too well she knew what this attack portended, but could naught but wring her hands as her men went down, one after another, until there were none left save two who broke from the encircling attackers and cut their way through to safety.

The bridle reins of her palfrey were quickly seized and she was led face to face with Ascanio Malatesta, whose cold eyes lighted with desire as he scanned her slim, well-rounded figure and the exceeding beauty of her superb mouth and chin and flawless, delicate nostrils and great dark eyes. But there was no kindness in those eyes for him, rather a great hatred shone forth and a scorn that would have beaten down any other man than Ascanio Malatesta.

"What means this savage and unprovoked attack upon me and my escort?" she demanded, her silvery voice throbbing with scorn. Ascanio Malatesta drew the back of his gauntlet across his lips before making reply, dropping his eyes before the blazing

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contempt with which she regarded him.

"You have trifled with me overlong, my lady," he mumbled, "and 'tis high time to end this comedy. Our lands adjoin and it is meet that they be united under one master . . ."

She glanced around through the woods and forward along the road that came from Malatesta's domain, finding the road crowded with men and horses as far as the eye could see, and realizing instantly that Malatesta's entire force, horse and foot, was on the march toward her territory.

It was with fresh anger that she turned to him once more, finding his eyes feasting on her face and figure so that she was nigh sickened for a second with the loathing that he inspired. But with it all she put a brave face upon the matter.

"Take care what you do, Ascanio Malatesta!" her clear voice was imperious and her chin lifted haughtily. "You no longer have a weak woman to fight against. You have a man who is a very lion in war. . . ."

Ascanio Malatesta laughed harshly. "If 'tis of Rafael Colonna you speak," he sneered, "know, my lady, that I'll have his throat slit before ever the day is finished."

"Boasting words do not win battles," she retorted, "and you are more like to find your evil head removed from its foul body in vengeance for the crime you are contemplating. Your force is no greater than the force under his command, and he is infinitely the more skilled captain . . ."

Ascanio Malatesta's sardonic laugh interrupted her.

"Cease this idle prattle!" he growled. "Know you not that I go to make junction with the forces of Cesare Borgia? That my force, together with his vast force, will overwhelm your town and castle before the night is well advanced?" His eyes gleamed with malice as he saw the white and stricken look in her face, and he jerked his hand toward some of his men, bidding them lead her away and put her in safe custody at the castle of the Black Bull, to await his return.

Even as she was led away, her heart heavy and her soul stunned with this information, Rafael Colonna was making ready to sally forth to her rescue.

He had thrown his black thoughts and heavy forebodings from him as one flings a sable coat from his shoulder. Swift came his orders—seeing to the proper provisioning of the town and castle and the proper munitioning and strengthening of the walls, even as his esquire aided him with his armor, buckling on greaves and cuisses, strapping finely wrought steel cuirass into place, screwing on helm, and lastly easing on the steel gauntlets. He stood forth at last, incased in black steel, the finest that Milan could produce, his helm surmounted with the leopard *couchant* of his house, and his long, straight-bladed sword slung at his waist.

LIGHTLY he leaped into the saddle, in full weight of armor, while his serried ranks of horsemen, two hundred steel and scarlet clad men, sat in their saddles waiting under their forest of lances. Grim and capable they looked, these veteran professional soldiers, carrying battle axes and long swords in addition to their heavy lances. Right well were they protected by bright steel morions and stout shining back and breast plates.

Rafael's voice trumpeted forth from

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the open visor of his helm and on a sudden there was a trampling of countless iron-shod hoofs as the column set forth. A deeper rumble followed as they passed under the gates of the citadel and out over the drawbridge. Striking fire from the cobblestones, they swept down through the town and out toward the great gates while white-faced women and worried-looking townsmen watched after them.

It was Rafael's plan to break through that encircling horde of armed men that was slowly but surely closing in upon the doomed city and castle, and to rescue Lady Yolanda from her abductors, thereafter fighting his way back to the city gates again to take charge of the defense.

Even now his orders for the defense of the walls were being carried out, for men were laboring at placing stores of great rocks and tree trunks along the battlements, while others made ready the caldrons for the boiling of pitch and lead to hurl down at the enemy. Still others piled the stores of stone and iron balls near the culverins which guarded the gates and carried bundles of cross-bow bolts and laid them in readiness by the embrasures.

Rafael had no illusions as to the difficulty of the task that lay ahead of him. It was certain now that both the forces of Ascanio Malatesta and of Cesare Borgia were arrayed against the town. Against such odds it was hopeless to consider winning by any ordinary means.

Boldness and swiftness might triumph, and upon these he counted. But first and foremost he must attempt the rescue of the Lady Yolanda, and he hoped against hope that the enemy had not yet appeared in such force that he could not break through and win her away from her captors.

Once clear of the gates, the road became on a sudden blocked with the wains and herds of the fleeing peasants, and the men-at-arms had great shift to force their way through them. It was only by filing from the thoroughfare out into the fields at the side that Rafael could make progress. The peasants watched them, dull-eyed and apathetic as they trotted bravely by. It was in every one's mind that resistance was futile and would only succeed in prolonging the agony.

But no sign of this did Rafael show. His great stallion trotted along beneath him, its powerful limbs moving smoothly and effortlessly. Behind him he heard all the cheerful sounds of mounted men on the march, the steady rise and fall of hoofs, thudding in the soft loam, the pleasing creak of leather rhythmically keeping time, and the cheerful clang and tinkle of arms and armor, the whole merging into a cadenced flow of sound extremely inspiring to the true cavalier.

The smoke palls ascended into the blue sky and spread like a cloak over the countryside. Somewhere, not far ahead, the enemy was burning and slaying and looting. Rafael called his trumpeter to his side, and the youth, clad in a tabard of sky-blue silk, unwrapped his embroidered banneret and flung it clear so that it hung from his instrument. From the head of the column Rafael called for his gonfalon, the triangular shaped banner of sky-blue silk, bearing the arms of the Colonna.

His own lance he had left behind, in favor of the great battle ax hanging from his saddle helm. His sword he loosed from its sheath.

From far ahead on the road came the warning note of a trumpet. There was a sudden blinding glitter of sun

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on steel. Rafael closed the visor of his helm. The enemy was in view!

CHAPTER III.

BATTLE!

THEY were farther down the road, signaled by a great cloud of dust from which came the occasional flash of crimson and gold lance pennon. Judging them as well as might be, Guido saw that they outnumbered his own force by fifty or sixty men-at-arms, but he rode forward undaunted ne'ertheless. If he could but win through the enemy horse before the enemy footmen arrived, he might yet succeed.

Signaling to his own force, he drew them up behind him in a long line, and as he galloped along in front of them he swiftly divided them into three parts, and, calling his sergeants to him, gave them brief order. The sergeants galloped back to their troops.

On a sudden the right hand troop swung off to the right and, laying lances in rest, flung itself at the head of the enemy column. The second troop, some threescore lances, as swiftly hurled itself at the center of the enemy column. The shock and jar of the onset of the first troop had scarce time to register upon the ear when the second troop struck like a solid wall of steel. In a trice the enemy column was thrown into the direst confusion. Men shouted and horses screamed in agony. There arose a great clangor of sword and battle ax against steel morion and breastplate. Kicking, struggling horses were down, with their riders either lying prone in the dust or staggering off in confusion to be out of harm's way. The rearmost elements of the enemy force began to struggle forward to add their numbers to the fray.

It was then that Rafael waved to his remaining threescore lances and led them at a sharp gallop along the flank of the struggling column until he had reached nearly to its end. Here he swung his line about, face to the enemy, and, drawing his great sword, shouted the command to gallop. His horse thundered on flying feet, his rank of steel-clad men rolled irresistibly forward behind him; together they struck the enemy column like a battering ram. There was a crash as of a great wave battering against the shore and a din of shouts and curses and clanging steel.

Rafael rose in his stirrups, swinging his great sword at the man-at-arms nearest him, a black-browed Sicilian who endeavored to ward the blow with his battle mace. But the straight-edged blade sheared through armor and flesh and bit deep into bone, so that the Sicilian slumped from his saddle with a scream. Rafael found himself suddenly engaged with three of the enemy who beset him with sword and battle ax, so that he was hard put to ward off their attack. Driving through with the point, he thrust deep into the throat of the nearest, leaned half out of the saddle as the glittering blade of a battle ax whistled within a hair's-breadth of his shoulder and struck down the second man before he had chance to recover.

All about him was a blind confusion of dust and struggling men and horses half seen through the haze. Some one thrust at him with a lance and he deflected it with his sword, driving his horse deep into the press and shouting aloud as he cut and thrust. Something clanged against his helm and he praised the saints for the strength of his armor

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as he turned and slashed with his great sword at a man who rode up on his left rear. Cutting and thrusting, he fought through the press, coming out at last on the far side, pursued by some three or four of the enemy who struck at him in a constant rain of blows.

NOW, turning like a wolf at bay, he brought his terrible sword into play once more, well nigh slashing the head from the shoulders of the nearest. The others gave back as the blood spurted upon them, but he followed them relentlessly, piercing a second through the thigh while the third fled incontinently, casting away his ax.

Looking about him for the first time he saw that the charge had overwhelmed all before it. As he drew out on the far side he noted the road filled with overborne men and horses and the survivors fleeing back toward the rear.

Quickly gathering in his stragglers, he galloped after them, his men plying sword and battle ax against the rearmost of the fleeing enemy as they rode along. Glancing behind him he saw that the fugitive peasants were taking advantage of the battle to hurry their progress into the city and that well nigh half of them were now within the gates. Staring ahead, his heart grew heavy as his eyes fell on the gleam of steel in a long column of infantry hurrying up from the enemy direction. There was no hope of forcing his way through those close-packed ranks of thousands of men.

It was certain defeat and death to venture farther. There was naught to do but withdraw, and withdraw he did, heavy hearted, having the trumpeter sound forth a blast that turned his men about and brought them galloping to his side.

Reforming them in rank, he drew off slowly and stubbornly toward the city. One of his men had captured a gonfalon of cloth-of-gold upon which was embroidered a red bull, the Red Bull of the Borgias, but no horseman of the enemy durst follow after to retrieve it.

A straggling procession of peasants was still passing in through the city gates, the last of the refugees, haply freed from attack by Rafael's horsemen. Behind these last a few enemy lancers hung about like jackals, but durst not come close. Rafael's force of mailed men at arms rode compactly and in good order with naught between them and the city gates but the last of the peasants, a few stragglers with a cart or two high piled with household goods.

It was then that a warning shout came from the far corner of the city wall, distant some thousand paces from Rafael's force. Glancing in that direction, he stood on a sudden up in his stirrups and stared through the bars of his visor and then 'gan swiftly to look about him and back at his solid ranks of men at arms.

For, rounding the corner of the city wall, came a mass of new horsemen, a great force of three hundred men or more, their steel gleaming and their lance pennons whipping. Carried at their head was a great gonfalon of orange silk upon which was embroidered the likeness of a black bull.

"The Black Bull of the Malatesta!" cried the old sergeant Pietro from behind Rafael.

They came on at full gallop, this new enemy force, thundering straight down the slope toward Rafael's force which they would inevitably catch in flank did he not move. They rode in some disorder, did these new enemies, but their weight and bulk and numbers would

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most certainly overbear Rafael's force in another minute or two.

On they came, shouting triumphantly, launching themselves like an unexpected bolt from the blue straight down on the unprepared force on the road below.

CHAPTER IV.

BEFORE THE STORM.

THE peril was imminent; the need for action was pressing. The enemy horsemen rode hard, lances in rest, flooding down the hill like a torrent straight at the flank of the force below.

Rafael wasted no more than one swift glance upon them, then turned immediately to his men, signaling them to face about to meet the oncoming horsemen. The long line of scarlet and steel-clad men at arms behind him wheeled on its right flank as on a pivot, completing the turn while yet the enemy was some five hundred paces distant.

Then there came from Rafael some sharp, quick orders, a sudden flurry in his ranks as two sergeants rode to new positions, followed by an imperceptible and slowly widening gap in the center of his long line.

The enemy had shortened the distance to some two hundred paces and were fully committed to the charge, horses moving at full speed, men riding low with lances in rest. Straight they came, their irregular line of maddened horses launched full at the center of the squadron below which was slowly moving into a gallop to meet them.

The distance was now shortened to a hundred paces. The gap between the two parts of Rafael's squadron had widened until there was now a space of some twoscore paces between the two parts.

Too late the enemy saw what was intended and too late they attempted to pull up their half-maddened horses. For when the enemy mass was distant only some fifty paces, the two halves of Rafael's squadron wheeled outward to the right and left. Through the wide gap thus formed rushed that mad torrent of struggling horses and men, unable to change direction nor to pull up, such was the momentum of that swift charge downhill.

They passed on in rear of the two halves of Rafael's squadron—two halves that heeded a sudden trumpet call from their commander and continued their wheel until each half had made a complete circle, completing a full turn until at last they were faced once more toward the enemy whose force was mixed in wild confusion below them on the road.

Rafael galloped out in front of the squadron, now faced away from the city walls, and drawing his sword, rode straight for the demoralized enemy force below, the two halves of his squadron drawing in together as they galloped until they were in solid rank once more.

The enemy men-at-arms turned and stared aghast at this solid wall of steel bearing down upon them and made shift to get out of its path. Such was the panic and so excited were men and horses that they succeeded only in making the confusion worse confounded.

Before the enemy men-at-arms could turn about and bring their ponderous lances to bear against this danger, Rafael's squadron struck the disorganized mass like an overwhelming, steel-tipped tidal wave. There was a

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rending, grinding, smashing sound above which rose the screams of horses and the shouts of men and the clang of steel on steel as Rafael's solid wall of horsemen overbore the enemy, overturning men and horses and leaving naught behind them save a welter of struggling men and animals and a scattering of men still mounted, fleeing to all parts of the compass.

A VAST cheer went up from the city walls as Rafael slowed down his squadron, swung it about and led it toward the gates, the exultant men-at-arms thundering through the sally port with lance pennons whipping and the cheers of the multitude ringing above the trample of countless iron-shod hoofs against the cobblestones.

The ponderous gates swung shut behind the last of the men-at-arms, the portcullis dropped down into place and the heavy drawbridge jerked unevenly up into the air and came to rest as Rafael rode up the winding road to the castle, raising the visor of his helmet as he glanced behind him to make swift appraisal of losses amongst those hardy two hundred men he had led forth. The long column behind him was scarce shortened by ten men.

Carlo Febbri, the captain of the guard, held his stirrup as he dismounted. The old soldier's face was alight with joy.

"Never have I seen such skilled handling of horsemen, my lord!" he marveled, but Rafael cut him short.

"See that the horses are cared for," he ordered. "Keep them ready and saddled against a chance for another sortie; meanwhile marshal the men-at-arms on foot and space them about the city walls to help. We have both Cesare Borgia and Ascanio Malatesta to fight this day."

"Aye, sir, even now the Borgia infantry is closing in against the south and west walls and the infantry of Malatesta 'gainst the north and east."

"How know you that they are Malatesta's men?" asked Rafael swiftly as he quaffed a flagon of wine that a lackey brought for him.

"They bear the Malatesta gonfalon, with its black bull."

"The Black Bull of the Malatesta and the Red Bull of the Borgia! Truly we will be skilled bull fighters 'fore we finish with these people!" laughed Rafael, and gat him to horse again.

"Or 'fore they finish with us," said Carlo Febbri and hurried to the marshaling of the men-at-arms, now on foot, as the gerfalcons and swivels on the city walls began to bark out defiance and the roar of battle started from below.

Rafael rode down toward the main gate of the city. To hearten the townsfolk he kept ever a smile upon his face, but there was little of happiness within his heart. Ever his thoughts turned upon the Lady Yolanda whose escort had been set upon and whose person had been abducted by this same foul Ascanio Malatesta, whose forces were even now leagued with the forces of Cesare Borgia against her ladyship's city and castle. Truly it was a dispiriting situation, for with these great forces marshaled against the city he was caught like a rat in a trap, unable to do aught but defend its walls against the besiegers.

The jubilation of the townsfolk, raised to sudden enthusiasm by the swiftness of his victory over the enemy cavalry, was now toned down to a sober realization of the danger that lay before them. For the lot of townsfolk in these troublous days was indeed hard. Should the enemy succeed in

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piercing the walls and enforcing entry, their houses and goods were subject to pillage, their lives were forfeit and their wives and daughters became the prey of the victors.

RAFAEL rode amongst them, a superb figure in his black armor with the leopard *couchant* on his helmet, and there was that about him that gave them confidence, so that men said,—"Look you, our Leopard will defend us from the Bulls."

He dismounted before the entrance of the right hand gate tower and strode up its winding staircase and out onto the platform of the overhanging battlements, where he stopped by a loophole and gazed out upon the scene below.

The whole plain was covered with the red and yellow livery of the Borgia forces. They had been closed up to within bow shot of the walls, carrying light bridges to throw over the moat and ladders wherewith to scale the walls. Behind them on the road, teams of oxen were slowly hauling siege ordnance. Below him on the wall a gerfalcon barked dully and spewed forth an iron ball that plowed in amongst the nearest of the massed enemy. A cheer went up from the walls as they saw the effect of this shot, a cheer which was answered by a vengeful shout from the enemy.

From what he could see of the force below Rafael reasoned that there must be all of three thousand Borgia men before the city. Report came to him from the other side of the town giving the numbers of the Malatesta forces as nigh on to fifteen hundred. Against these he had scarce but a thousand men and such help as the untrained townsfolk could give him.

For the nonce the enemy seemed content to go forward with his preparations, continuing to drag up scaling ladders and mantlets while his soldiers massed nearer and ever nearer the walls. Rafael sought for their leader and found him, at last, to be none other than the great black-bearded Sicilian, Ramiro Lorques, Cesare Borgia's most trusted captain.

Turning from this scene, Rafael made his way about the walls, seeing that his men were at their posts and organizing the townsfolk in their work of bringing up missiles to cast upon the enemy. Fires were alight under the great caldrons, ready to supply the melted lead and boiling oil to cast over the ramparts.

Men with lighted matches stood by the gerfalcons and swivels. His men-at-arms were spaced in small clumps of four or five at intervals along the walls, to stiffen the resistance of the levies, who stood ready with cross-bows and arquebuses to rain a hail of missiles at the besiegers.

On their part the enemy worked silently and relentlessly, toiling at their preparations with a grim sureness of endeavor that was sinister in its very lack of sound. Over the entire scene brooded a hushed spirit of waiting similar to the quiet that precedes a storm.

"Methinks they will attack at dusk, my lord," said Carlo Febbri, the captain of the guard.

CHAPTER V.

A SECRET MISSION.

"WHERE think you they will attack in force?" asked Rafael. The two men stood on the topmost platform of the northeast tower, from whence they could see not

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only the Borgia forces on the plain in front of the town, but could see part of the Malatesta forces as well, these latter laboring no less actively than their allies.

"'Tis hard to state, my lord, so evenly spaced are the enemy all about us. He is a shrewd captain, yon Ramiro Lorques, and 'tis certain that he will not disclose the point where he intends to attack in force until he has made ready."

"Assuredly," agreed Rafael. "In which case 'twere best to make provision against it. Do thou gather a force of three hundred men, taking one hundred men-at-arms and the other two hundred of levies and hold them in the market place until Ramiro Lorques discloses his main attack. We can then rush them to the threatened point."

Carlo Febbri nodded and hurried away, marveling a little at the astuteness of this Rafael who showed such marvelous perception of war. But Rafael was deep in thought, staring alternately from the Borgia forces with their red bull to the Malatesta forces with the black bull rampant on their gonfalon.

It was in the Malatesta castle that Lady Yolanda was now made prisoner, and he raged inwardly as he thought of his helplessness to aid her. In the white heat of his rage an idea came to him, and he halted in his striding, his eyes alight as he turned it over in his mind. Suddenly he slapped his mailed thigh with a ring of his gauntleted hand. It lacked yet an hour of dusk. Descending from the battlements, he mounted his horse and rode up to the castle where he strode into the great hall, calling for paper and ink and goose quill.

These once brought, he sat him down and wrote a letter, dusted it with sand and sealed it with his signet ring. This task finished, he commanded that the man in the gray cloak, the clumsy would-be assassin whose attempt on his life he had foiled, be brought to him. Waiting for the man's appearance, he sat there tapping the letter against his knee.

There came a clanking of chains scraping across the stone flooring of the hall, and the prisoner was before him, manacled hand and foot and under guard of a turnkey who carried his bunch of keys as a sign of office.

"What is thy name, fellow?" asked Rafael sharply of the prisoner.

The man gulped hard, his face ashy pale with terror, for he was certain now that his time had come.

"Roderigo Scapponi, your lordship," stuttered the prisoner.

"Wouldst prefer to die at the strangler's hands or to be hung from the battlements?" Rafael's voice came again, harsh and abrupt.

The fellow cowered down in the clank of his chains.

"Mercy, my lord, mercy!" he quavered. His voice died away as Rafael continued to stare at him.

After a minute Rafael's voice broke the silence again.

"Or wouldst prefer to go free and unscathed in return for a slight service?"

The fellow looked up, a slow dawning hope beginning to appear in his haggard eyes.

"Your lordship is not jesting with me?" he asked weakly.

"Dog, would I jest with such as you?" stormed Rafael.

"Your pardon, my lord, your pardon," cried the wretched man. "Certes, my lord, I would do thee any service if my life be but spared!"

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"It is but a simple service that I require," returned Rafael, musingly, "being naught but to take a letter to Ramiro Lorques, the captain of the Borgia forces now besetting us."

The man's eyes gleamed strangely. He dropped them to conceal the eagerness they showed and mumbled his willingness to carry the letter at once.

Rafael studied him sternly.

"But no treachery," he warned. "If I have thy manacles stricken off and send thee forth free and unharmed, thou art to keep thy word!"

"Aye, your lordship, by the Holy Saints I swear it!"

And thus it was that the man who had come to assassinate Rafael Colonna was freed of his shackles and sent forth, being escorted blindfolded by a secret exit from the city and turned loose to carry the letter to Ramiro Lorques.

IT lacked half an hour of dusk, and in that half hour Rafael occupied himself strangely. For he went first off to the Guild of the Tailors and sent word that they should assemble at their guild hall. Once they were gathered, he gave them their orders very explicitly, and they, marveling somewhat, were put to sewing and stitching and cutting, working desperately fast.

Thereafter, just before the hour of dusk, he repaired to the battlements, where he sought and found Carlo Febbri, the captain of the guard.

"Do thou take the section of wall beset by the forces of Malatesta," he ordered. "If I have reasoned correctly their attack will be but half-hearted. At first sign of this lack of vigor, leave but a third of thy forces to repel them and send the remainder to me to aid in fighting off the Borgia forces. Dost understand?"

Carlo Febbri looked dubious, but assented, departing for his post more than a little puzzled.

Scarce had Rafael arrived at the main gate when there came a blare of trumpets from outside and a wild shout rose from the attackers. There was no answering shout, for the defenders of the wall stood their posts in grim silence, cannoneers with lighted matches, cross-bowmen with weapons wound and men-at-arms ready with halberds and swords.

The light was growing dimmer minute by minute, but in the fast gathering gloom the enemy could be seen, carrying light bridges and moving forward on the moat. The main attack seemed concentrated on the section of the wall just beyond the city gates, a section that was lower, for some reason, than the other portions of the defense. Here it was that Rafael hurried and found the defenders busy, attempting to break up the parties of men transporting the light bridges. Arquebuses were crashing, there came the boom of swivels and gerfalcons, and the steady deep-toned twang of cross-bows as cross-bow bolts and leaden bullets rained on the enemy.

In spite of the rain of death, the Borgia men, their losses replaced as fast as they occurred, managed to bridge the moat in several places simultaneously and swarmed across with their ladders. Now the fighting grew hot.

Added to the rain of cross-bow bolts and bullets came the thunderous crash of great logs toppled over onto the men below and buckets of boiling oil and melted lead were cast upon them. Screams and yells of pain came from below. But the Borgia men continued to stream across the narrow foot bridges and to swell the strength of

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the attackers below the walls. Ladder tips appeared above the battlements. Leaping at the nearest, Rafael flung it back, using his sword to topple it over. They were appearing all along the wall now and the defenders fought to prevent their staying in place.

Ladder after ladder was flung down only to have new ones take their places. From the far edge of the moat, the enemy arquebusiers and cross-bowmen kept up a steady rain of missiles against the defenders so that the air was filled with whirring steel bolts and fragments of lead. Next to Rafael a soldier from the foot levies dropped screaming with a cross-bow bolt buried in his neck. Other men dropped dead or wounded to the right and left. Rafael shouted for reënforcements from the nearest towers as the heads of the enemy began to appear above the battlements.

WHIRRING his great sword about his head, he flung himself on the nearest, cutting and slashing in a perfect fury of smiting steel, savagely attacking the first three men who had leaped over the battlements. One he drove off the top of the wall in the impetuosity of his rush, the second he smote heavily, his steel biting through neckpiece and leather collar and sinking deep into flesh and bone so that the man slumped like a sack of meal.

The third man drove at Rafael with a halberd. The young knight skillfully parried its questing blade and drove down at the arms of the wielder, nearly severing them with the swiftness of the blow. The man tottered across the platform and tumbled from its farther edge as Rafael overthrew the ladder by which he had climbed and turned to the next foes.

The platform seemed on a sudden to be filled with the liveries of red and yellow Borgia men, hewing and hacking with sword and dagger and halberd. Rafael flung himself at the nearest foes, making fearful play with his great sword. Blows clanged against his armor, sword points and halberd tips thrust at openings in his platings; but, oblivious, he swung his sword, in great sweeping, slashing blows that left a trail of wounded and dying men to mark his progress. So fearful was the onslaught of this formidable knight in the black armor that the Borgia 'gan to give back fearfully before, and the remainder of the defenders took fresh heart and rallied to their leader.

But more and more of the enemy were swarming up the ladders until it seemed that the wall was conquered at this point. Massing his men behind him, Rafael turned and retraced his steps, hacking and smiting his way through the fresh press of enemies, cutting a swath through their mass as a reaper cuts through the ripened grain. At his side and behind him, his men added to the carnage, knocking over ladders and driving the enemy men-at-arms to the platform edge, where they were shoved off to the streets below. There the townsfolk made short work of them.

He had fought half way down the length of the fighting platform when there came a great shout and the sound of cheering and Carlo Febbri appeared, leading reënforcements from the far walls.

The new arrivals made short work of the remaining attackers and cleared the wall of dead and living enemies in swift and methodical fashion. For a space Rafael paused in his labors and drew breath, listening to the sounds of

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combat from the other parts of the beleaguered city.

No more ladders appeared above the wall beside him. Looking over into the moat he saw that the Borgia men were making haste to withdraw, pursued by the vengeful cross-bow bolts of the defenders. Cressets were aflare all along the walls, lighting up the darkness and making the scene as bright as day.

The clamor of combat was dying on all sides. The hoarse boom of cannon lessened as he listened. Cheers went up from the defenders as they began to realize that they had beaten off this first attack. Carlo Febbri returned to Rafael, wiping his face and panting as he spoke.

"It was as you said, my lord," announced Carlo. "The attack of Malatesta's men was but half-hearted. They did no more than stand off and rain cross-bow bolts at the battlements. Seeing this, I brought the bulk of my men to your aid as you had commanded." Carlo Febbri stared at his leader reflectively. "But begging your pardon, my lord, how knew you of this strange half-heartedness of the Malatesta men in advance?"

CHAPTER VI.

A KNIGHT RIDES FORTH.

ASCANIO MALATESTA was no figure of a man to inspire a poet to song or a lady to sighing. His was a huge frame, overlaid with fat, his jowls hung down in great creases and he was dewlapped like an ox. Red and sensual looking was his mouth, with great, loose, cruel lips, but his eyes were the worst, being very small and close set like the eyes of a pig and being, moreover, uncommon cold and inhuman-looking in their fixed and unblinking stare.

Dark tales were told of Ascanio Malatesta, dark tales for even those dark days of Italy of the Renaissance where the Borgias set the fashion in villainy. Strange stories crept about of the doings at the Castle of the Black Bull which frowned down upon the lordship of Sanrovere.

He sat now, did Ascanio Malatesta, in his tent, poring over a letter. It made no difference that the letter was sealed and addressed to Ramiro Lorques, his ally, with whom he was joined in the siege of Lady Yolanda's town and castle. His own man had brought it and stood waiting humbly while he read. It was none other than the man who had been freed by Rafael Colonna a scant quarter of an hour before, the would-be assassin, the man in the gray cloak, whom Rafael had sent with the letter to Ramiro Lorques.

The wretch had sped straightway to his own lord and master, Ascanio Malatesta, seeking thereby to curry favor and secure forgiveness for having failed to kill Rafael as he had been bidden.

"And you say that this Rafael Colonna enjoined you especially to give this letter into no other hands than those of Ramiro Lorques?" Ascanio Malatesta fixed his piggish eyes on the man before him in a cold and searching glare, with something of the fixed intensity of a serpent's lidless gaze.

"Aye, my lord," murmured the fellow.

Ascanio reread the letter, his fat face showing none of the emotion it caused him. In truth it was a rare stroke of good luck that he had gained possession of it. . . .

". . . to mutually overcome the said Ascanio Malatesta and his forces as we

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have agreed," read the letter. "To this end I will hold my forces ready to attack him at midnight, sallying forth from the north sally port of the city and falling upon the southernmost part of his camp at the stroke of twelve. As your secret emissary hath stated, you will at the same time attack him in full force at the opposite end of his camp.

"Between our two forces he should have small chance of surviving. With this I am in accord and will thereafter surrender the citadel and town pertaining to Lady Yolanda's rule, to your forces, you to reward me by granting me Malatesta's domain, comprising the Castle of the Black Bull and the territories of Sanrovere pertaining thereto."

The letter was signed "Rafael Colonna" with a great flourish of the pen.

"You have done well," grumbled Ascanio Malatesta to his faithful henchman. "Go now and seek refreshment. I will send for you anon when there is need."

It still lacked half an hour of dusk, the time set for the attack. Ascanio Malatesta called in his captain of the guard, one Antonio Bratelli, a hard-faced and cruel looking man with a cast in one eye which lent him an even more ferocious air. To him he handed the letter, stating in brief how it had come into his hands.

Bratelli read it through and cursed.

"THE more fool you, my lord, for having put trust in any man in the employ of Cesare Borgia!" growled the captain roughly. "I have never liked this soft-spoken Ramiro Lorques, and have never considered him aught but a black-hearted Sicilian."

"Aye, and now meseems, he plots to attack me treacherously and give my territories to this fellow Colonna as reward for aiding him! Indeed, I think we will punish this Ramiro Lorques before we are through with him," and a cruel, almost maniacal glare came into Malatesta's eyes. "But what measures, think you, we should take at once?"

The captain frowned as he reread the letter.

"'Twere best to move softly," he said after a pause. "Who knows that this letter may be a ruse of Colonna's to embroil us with Ramiro Lorques?"

"I had thought on that," admitted Ascanio Malatesta, "but I misdoubt me if Colonna hath enough guile in him for that."

Antonio Bratelli shrugged his shoulders and stared thoughtfully at the letter again.

"Methinks 'twere better did we act as if innocent of all knowledge of this letter," he suggested. "My advice would be to go forward as if naught had happened and take up our part of the attack against the city at dusk, but to content ourselves with a show of attacking only. Then, lacking an hour of midnight, let us leave the camp standing with a few men only in evidence. Withdrawing out of sight with the greater part of our force, we could then fall upon Ramiro Lorques's men in the darkness of the night."

"What does that profit us?" asked Malatesta.

Antonio Bratelli explained patiently.

"Look you, my lord, if 'tis only a ruse of Colonna's to embroil us with Ramiro Lorques we can discover that fact at midnight. If this letter carries truth on its pages, then we are well set to avoid danger and to inflict punishment." He glanced sidewise at his

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master. "And then my lord can return to the castle where Lady Yolanda awaits his pleasure." Ascanio Malatesta nodded, his pendulous cheeks quivering jelly-like at the motion.

"So be it," he said and, ponderously rising, prepared to go forth to the fighting, for the hour of dusk had come.

THE end of the fight left the townsfolk jubilant and rejoicing. The men at arms, professionals with much experience in war, were under no illusions. Knowing full well that this respite would be but temporary, they seized what refreshment and rest they could.

Rafael, after making the rounds of the walls and estimating the damage to men and material, returned to the castle. There came to him a half hour later, as he supped, a group of men in tailors' gowns, bearing cloth-wrapped bundles twoscore or more in number. These were deposited in the great hall and Rafael had a guard placed over them, forbidding that they be touched under pain of death.

At the time of the changing of the second watch, when all the men at arms had been rested and refreshed and the horses fed and watered, he gave orders that the cloth-covered bundles be carried to the inner entrance of the north sally port and left there under strict guard.

Thereafter he commanded that the men at arms move to horse, and a subdued clatter 'gan immediately to rise in the courtyard as horses were led forth, girths tightened, and bridles put on, while the men busied themselves in buckling their armor in place and looking to their weapons.

At the same time he sent orders for the marshaling of the levies, fixing the street back of the city gate as their assembly place. Taking horse he rode down to inspect this, finding all of a thousand men filling the narrow street from house to house, with pikes and halberds blood-red in the lights from the casements whence curious womenfolk looked down. In command of these levies he left Carlo Febbri, giving him very particular instructions and leaving him also two trusty sergeants as aides. It lacked now less than an hour to midnight and Rafael turned about and went back to the castle.

Standing to horse in the courtyard were his ten score men at arms, hands on their bridle reins, waiting him expectantly. But instead of giving them the order to mount into the saddle, he commanded that they follow him, leading their horses in single file. From the courtyard he led the long column through a gallery and out to the north sally port in the main wall (for the castle was high up in a corner of the city and the castle wall and the city wall were one and the same at this point).

Men stood beside the cloth-covered bundles and, as the sally port was opened and Rafael led out and into the darkness of the night, each man was handed a red and yellow surcoat similar to those worn by the Borgia men at arms. Each man put this on over his armor. Some inkling of the plan of their commander began to come to those soldiers, and they chuckled to themselves as they filed out the sally port and down the dark hillside. Halfway down, Rafael halted them and began to form them up as each man and horse arrived. After a few minutes they were all mounted and in line. The sergeant-gonfalonier suddenly unfurled his gonfalon and the nearest men marveled to see that it carried the

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Red Bull of the Borgia on its silken surface, being no less than the banner captured from the Borgia horsemen earlier in the day.

Rafael moved his squadron out silently, swinging them about as they passed across the valley and out to its entrance where the camp fires of the Malatesta forces could even now be seen. The shadows of sentinels moved across the face of the fires as the squadron crept nearer. At last Rafael gave the command to lay lances in rest and to gallop. The long line swept down on the silent encampment.

NOW the cautious Ascanio Malatesta, taking the advice of his captain, had, a good hour before midnight, raised his ponderous bulk into the saddle and led his host out of their camp to a position in concealment upon its flank. Behind him, among the tents and wattled huts, he left a small force of men to tend the camp fires and keep up the illusion that the place was occupied. Distant not over five hundred paces from his camp, he kept anxious eyes out for troops coming from the direction of the Borgia camp.

His surprise was all the more great, therefore, when he heard the distant thunder of hoofs and saw a wave of steel-clad horsemen gallop into his camp from the opposite direction, their lances laid in rest and their leader's sword drawn from its scabbard. The light of the camp fires showed up very plainly the red and yellow of the Borgia liveries as the attackers swept through the camp, driving the few sentries before them. With all his anger at the treachery of Ramiro Lorques, he yet smiled bleakly at his own astuteness in withdrawing from danger.

As he watched, the attacking horsemen milled about in some uncertainty until their leader assembled them and they quickly galloped back whence they had come, disappearing from view into the valley that led below the castle wall.

"Now is the time, my lord!" exclaimed Antonio Bratelli, and vaulted into his saddle. "'Tis evident those horsemen are going to circle about the walls and return to the Borgia camp from the opposite side. If we move out now we can arrive before them and attack the Borgia footmen still in camp!"

Incensed by the treachery shown him by Ramiro Lorques, Ascanio Malatesta grunted assent and gave the order to march, leading out himself the two hundred or so men at arms on horseback, left him after Rafael's disastrous attack that morning. They commenced to stream down the slope, followed at short distance by the footmen, trudging along, trailing their ten-foot pikes and their halberds.

Straight for the Borgia camp Ascanio led them, enjoining strict silence upon them and moving very cautiously through the darkness.

As the fat Ascanio had reasoned, the force of enemy horsemen were circling back around the city wall, describing a wide arc to avoid the Borgia sentinels and coming at last to the plain, a thousand paces or so from the Borgia camp, sprawled hither and yon over the meadows.

Scarce had Rafael arrived there when there broke out a frightful clamor from the far side of the Borgia encampment. A trumpet blared above the sound of arquebuses and of shouted battle cries and the clang of steel. A tent went up in flames, and in its light Rafael saw the forces of Malatesta savagely attacking the un-

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suspecting Borgia. The black bull gonfalon of the Malatesta was plain to be seen in the glare of the fires. The Borgia soldiers, rubbing the sleep from their eyes, grasped what weapons they could lay hands to and swarmed to repel the enemy.

Ramiro Lorques appeared in half armor, buckling on his sword and shouting loudly for his horse as Rafael led his men swiftly toward the confused scene.

When close to the edge of the camp he halted his men in the shadows and watched the embroilment, glancing ever and anon at the drawbridge raised above the city gates. By now the Malatesta and Borgia forces were thoroughly engaged. Ramiro Lorques, shouting "Treachery!" had leaped into the saddle of a half maddened horse and galloped into the thick of the fray, exhorting his men to stand fast and attempting to organize some resistance to this treacherous night attack.

The Borgia soldiers were streaming from every point of the compass toward the thick of the fighting and would inevitably succeed in beating off the attack by sheer weight of numbers, as Rafael well knew. Again and again he glanced at the city gates. At last he saw the drawbridge come jerking downward, saw the portcullis raised, and saw the city gates fold back. Streaming out of them and racing across the drawbridge came a flood of pikemen and halberdiers, launching themselves at the flank of the Borgia forces, with Carlo Febbri and his two sergeants leading the van.

Certain of these foot soldiers immediately detached themselves from the onrushing column and applied torches to the siege works, to the piles of ladders and the ballista carriages, and began dragging forward and overturning the heavy cannon into the moat. But the bulk of the foot levies hurled themselves on the flank of the struggling Borgia forces, who dazedly turned to meet this new danger, but too late to avert its blow. In a minute the Borgia were hemmed in on two sides, fighting for life.

RAFAEL chose this minute to launch his charge upon their rear, smashing his long, heavy line of nearly two hundred armored horsemen into the close packed and struggling mass of the Borgia infantry. On the far flank of the camp the Borgia lancers were hastily attempting to saddle their horses and marshal into some sort of formation, but to these Rafael paid no heed as he busied himself in hewing and hacking at the dismounted force arrayed before him.

Fearful execution did they do, those men-at-arms led by the knight in black armor, and they drove through the demoralized and panic-stricken Borgia foot soldiers like a huge battering ram, knocking over everything in their path.

Human nature could not stand against that triple attack, and the Borgia, assailed front, flank and rear, suddenly turned tail and swarmed out of the far side of the camp, the only way left open. They fled in headlong panic, Ramiro Lorques, the black-bearded Sicilian captain carried along with them in spite of his struggles.

The forces of Ascanio Malatesta streamed along beside them, harrying them like wolves. Rafael reassembled his men-at-arms by trumpet call and set them to stamping out the remnants of the Borgia forces still in the camp, scattered bands, footmen and horse-

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men both, who had been too late in saving themselves. A messenger sent to Carlo Febbri brought the old captain of the guard to him in short order.

The dismounted levies were already engaged in plundering the camp as Carlo Febbri rode up. The rays of the moon bathed the plain in silvery light, making all things bright as day and easily discernible.

"See that all weapons and armor are saved and brought to the castle," ordered Rafael, and stared after the Borgia forces and the Malatesta band, streaming off over the plain, still fighting. "Meseems that we have set the Red Bull and the Black Bull to fighting with a vengeance!" he remarked with the faint trace of a smile.

"'Twas skillfully done, my lord," replied Carlo Febbri heartily, "but now what? The Lady Yolanda is still prisoner at the Castle of the Black Bull!" He stared anxiously at his leader.

"It is of that that I wished to speak to you," answered Rafael. "Methinks there is little danger of the return of either Red Bull or Black Bull. The city and castle are safe for the nonce. I would fain set about the rescue of Lady Yolanda's person. Think you you can hold the town in my absence?"

Carlo Febbri shook his head and looked grave.

"How many men does my lord wish to take with him?" he asked.

"None save myself!" answered Rafael calmly.

Carlo Febbri's jaw dropped. "It is your lordship's intention to venture alone to the rescue of Lady Yolanda?" he asked incredulously, his voice raised in his astonishment.

"But surely," said Rafael. "It may be that Malatesta and Ramiro Lorques will discover the trick we have played upon them and reunite and return. In such case it would be unwise to denude the garrison of a single man . . ." He raised his hand to his eyes and stared off across the plain to where the Borgia forces and the Malatesta pursuers were still in view. "And if I mistake not, they are already in accord. Look you, they have ceased their flight and stopped their fighting. Even now they have halted and are conferring! It were best that I rode straightway to the rescue of Lady Yolanda, ere they beset the town again. Do thou hold all until I return." And, turning, he called his men-at-arms to crowd in more closely.

"I go now and leave you to the command of Carlo Febbri. In all things obey him implicitly and so act that at my return I shall hear good account of you. Is it understood?"

"Aye, my lord!" went up their shout.

Rafael gave a last look about him. The forces of the Red and the Black Bull were still conferring and making shift to bring some sort of order to their scattered members. The foot levies belonging to the city were still busied in looting the Borgia camp and in stripping the dead of weapons and armor.

"Your pardon, my lord," interrupted Carlo Febbri, "but meseems that it would be wiser did you take at least a score of men-at-arms with you. Otherwise you run grave danger of losing your life."

But Rafael shook his head. "I had as lief take none as too few," he answered, "and more than a few cannot be spared from the defense of the city. Get you back within the walls while I set forth." And with that he had

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swung his horse about and was on his way.

CHAPTER VII.

PURSUIT.

IT was even as Rafael had surmised. Rendered suspicious mayhap by the sight of Rafael and his men-at-arms disguised in the red and yellow surcoats of the Borgias, both Ramiro Lorques and Ascanio Malatesta strove to stop the fighting between their followers until at last they had achieved a certain degree of peace. The two leaders came together to parley. High words passed between them at the beginning, but their anger changed on a sudden and shifted itself to Rafael Colonna when they found how they had been tricked.

As they parleyed there came riding to them an inconspicuous figure wearing a gray cloak, Roderigo Scapponi, the assassin who had carried Rafael's letter to Ascanio Malatesta.

Malatesta's anger at him blazed forth, but was stilled as Roderigo pleaded to deliver his message. He had attached himself inconspicuously to the foot levies from the city. Unnoticed in their company he had moved near, what time Rafael had addressed Carlo Febbri and the men at arms.

"...and I tell you, my lord," he went on, "that even now this Rafael rides alone toward the Castle of the Black Bull for the purpose of effecting the rescue of the Lady Yolanda!"

"Alone!" both Ramiro Lorques and Ascanio Malatesta exploded.

"Aye, my lords," reiterated Roderigo Scapponi, "with these very ears and eyes I heard him bid his men remain behind and saw him ride away unaccompanied!"

"This is passing strange," grumbled Ascanio Malatesta suspiciously, "belike 'tis some new wile?"

But Ramiro Lorques, the Sicilian commanding Cesare Borgia's forces, kept thoughtful silence for a space, stroking his black beard the while.

"Methinks I should ride after him and do him to death afore he accomplishes more harm," Ascanio went on and turned to give orders to his men.

But Ramiro Lorques halted him.

"LET us take things in the order of their importance," he suggested smoothly, "meseems it is most important to secure this Rafael Colonna whose death is desired by Cesare Borgia above all things. Next in order cometh the capture of the city. And to aid this last there is a third thing of pressing import." He paused.

"And what is that?" asked Ascanio Malatesta.

"The speedy death of Lady Yolanda," returned Ramiro Lorques.

"But, nay, I had desired to keep her for mine own!" objected Ascanio Malatesta, his fat jowls setting into stubborn lines.

"Ho! What is one woman more or less?" exclaimed Ramiro Lorques roughly. "Heavy would be the anger of Cesare Borgia against thee and me if we allowed one chit of a nineteen-year-old girl to block the wheels of statecraft. And look you, with her once out of the way there is no reason for the city continuing its stubbornness and it would quickly succumb. As long as she is alive they will hold out till the death at the cost of much precious time, much money and many lives on our part..." And he went on alternately threatening and cajoling Ascanio Malatesta until that slow-think-

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ing person at the last was brought around to his view.

"There is, I misdoubt not," said Ramiro Lorques, "a shorter trail over the hills to your castle than the long route by the road?"

"Aye, there is that."

"Send then some trusted man of yours with orders to strangle the Lady Yolanda and make an end to all this pother."

Ascanio Malatesta's cold eye sought out the gray-cloaked Roderigo who stood hard by. With a crook of his finger, he called the assassin to his side and gave him his orders, whereat Roderigo, anxious to regain his lord's favor, set forth immediately.

"So important is this taking of Rafael Colonna that meseems we should trust it to nc underlings," said Ramiro Lorques, a gleam of hatred in his eye as he reflected upon how he had been tricked and cozened by this same Rafael. "Therefore it were best did you and I pick a score of lances apiece and follow after him, and that right swiftly."

Ascanio Malatesta looked surprised.

"But how about our forces here, and what about the city?" he asked.

"We can return ere dawn," said Ramiro Lorques. "In the meantime, your second captain and mine can marshal our forces and lead them back to reinvestment of the walls. With this Rafael Colonna out of the city there is little to fear from its defenders."

And so it was agreed. The two, once their minds were made up, wasted little time in setting about their business. Picking a score of men at arms apiece they set forth, riding two by two, their horses' hoofs thudding at a steady gallop along the forest road, the moonlight gleaming on their armor.

So it was that scarce fifteen minutes after Rafael had set forth alone, some forty men at arms, headed by the vengeful Ramiro Lorques and the Malatesta, rode after him in hot pursuit. All unaware of this he opened the visor of his helm to the coolness of the night air and drank deep of the forest odor, compounded of leaf mold and growing things, and was well content to be out of all the turmoil for the nonce and rejoicing in the silence of the forest.

ALL unbeknown to Rafael, Roderigo Scapponi plied whip and spur, forcing his horse over the narrow trail which led across the hills to the Castle of the Black Bull. The wiry jade he rode scrambled through the brush and floundered down hillsides, its nose ever pointed questingly homeward to its own stable.

There were few thoughts in Roderigo's mind on the task that faced him. Being a professional bravo, a hired assassin, the task before him was naught but something in the way of business and he looked upon it in no other manner. The strangling of a woman was child's play compared to some of the tasks he had been set and he saw naught but an easy means of reestablishing himself in the favor of his lord.

On their part, Ramiro Lorques and Ascanio Malatesta rode grimly silent, thinking on the pleasure that would soon be theirs in putting an end to this pernicious Rafael Colonna who had so willfully upset their plans. Be it said for Ascanio Malatesta that he felt a faint tinge of regret for the approaching death of the Lady Yolanda, for in his fat and sluggish way he had been smitten with her beauty and desired to possess her.

But, he reflected, in the game of

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statecraft and power in which he was engaged, there could be no tarrying for women, and with a sigh he relinquished all thought of her. As for Ramiro Lorques, there was not the slightest compunction in his mind over the death to which he had condemned Lady Yolanda. To that cold-blooded Sicilian she was simply an obstacle to the plans of his master, Cesare Borgia, and as such should be blotted out as quickly as might be.

Yet another one along that same road thought of Lady Yolanda and that was Rafael, who galloped his horse at loose rein and allowed his thoughts to dwell upon the exceeding beauty and high courage and surpassing loveliness of the girl whom he soon hoped to wed.

His road led him through the forest and over a low hill and his willing horse bore him along at tireless speed, making the road seem naught but a white ribbon which flew beneath his feet. The willing beast breasted the hills and seemed rather to float than to gallop down into the valleys while ever the trees swept by on right and left and ever he came nearer and nearer his goal, all thoughts of danger forgotten in his great desire to look once more upon the beauteous features of the Lady Yolanda.

Some native caution impelled him occasionally to glance ahead and to right and left as he galloped forward in the moonlight, but he concerned himself little with the rear, fearing naught from that direction and unaware of the forty men at arms moving swiftly along the forest road, their armor gleaming in the moonlight like the scales of a steel-plated snake as they flowed along the forest road, led by the two captains.

As he rode he sang under his breath, repeating the words and music of "La Bella Franceschina," a song then very popular in Florence. He sang the melody, keeping time to the heavy hoof beats of his horse, his heart strangely light within him for all that he knew of the danger of the task that lay ahead, wherein he must, single-handed, attempt the rescue of his lady from the castle of his enemy.

The moon rose ever higher in the heavens, bathing the forest glades in unreal silver light and casting black shadows from the tree trunks and arabesques of interlaced silver and ebony across the forest road.

His horse was sweeping along at full gallop, but on a sudden at the angle of the road his eye noted a patch of moonlight more than usually lustrous and gleaming. He reined in sharply, knowing that naught but steel could reflect moonlight in such fashion. More steel appeared to the right and left. As his horse stood fast, for the first time he heard the pound and heave of many thudding hoofs advancing swiftly along behind him.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE LADY YOLANDA IS BESET.

LADY YOLANDA was not of the stuff that shows anguish before a tire-woman, and thus her face was composed and serene as she bade old Marie good night. The old beldame, ordered to care for the high-born prisoner, shuffled out of the tower room high in the Castle of the Black Bull and cast an admiring look back at the slim straightness of her ward.

For the Lady Yolanda, in her black velvet gown, looked indeed like some painting by the masters of Florence, or again like some statue of clear-cut

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ivory warmly flushed by an old rose light from a stained glass window. Old Marie grunted as she found her pallet in the antechamber and composed herself to rest, hoping that the man-at-arms on duty at the outer door would not ground his halberd too often and too noisily during the rest of the night.

It was not until she disappeared from the tower room hung with its frayed tapestries that Lady Yolanda changed on a sudden from the serene appearance she had heretofore retained and sank all atremble on her divan.

Not until the long hours of the night were arrived had the true danger of her situation been impressed upon her, for the shock and excitement of the sudden attack on her escort and the swift ride wherein she was led captive in the Castle of the Black Bull had succeeded only in rousing her anger. Such was her confidence in her affianced lover, Rafael Colonna, that she envisaged him coming very swiftly to her rescue.

The first note of disquiet that struck her was Ascanio Malatesta's abrupt departure at the head of all his men. Without telling she knew that he went forth to attack her city and castle. Later, during the day, chance spoken words of the servants informed her of Ramiro Lorques's return to recommence his attempts to seize her stronghold. This disquieted her even more, for it needed no great wisdom to inform her that the combined forces of Ramiro Lorques and Malatesta spelled grave danger, not only to her territories, but to the person of Rafael Colonna. And as night grew on apace and there came no word, her feeling of helplessness and her fear of the unknown took deeper hold upon her.

Throughout all this she visualized no personal danger, but at last had come the rapidly mounting premonition of evil that threatened herself. Throughout the day and the evening she had managed to maintain her composure, but now alone in that silent tower room high above this grim Castle of the Black Bull, she felt all of a sudden as forlorn as a small child fearing the dark and in need of its mother.

A bronze candelabrum with its seven candles threw flickering lights and shadows in the far corners of the room. From below in the courtyard came the sharp challenge of a sentry and the creak of an opening gate as some one was admitted. There arose a murmur of words whose purport she could not fathom, and again came silence, broken only by the faint guttering of the candles in their sockets and the even fainter whisp of the wall tapestries swayed by the night breeze.

The very stones of this grim castle, crouched like a beast on its hilltop, seemed to exude evil. Save for old Marie, who seemed kindly, though frightened and broken spirited, the retainers of this Ascanio Malatesta were cast in evil mold, and the place was guarded by men of lowering visage and cruel and haggard eyes.

It smote her on a sudden that her own life hung by a very narrow thread in this place of danger and treachery.

Her heart stopped beating on a sudden as she heard the clang of a halberd butt against the stone in the hall beyond the anteroom.

Old Marie rose on her elbow from her pallet as she heard whispered words coming from the hallway. Suddenly she was out on the floor as a man appeared in the entrance. The old beldame's face blanched, for she well knew Roderigo Scapponi.

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From the fellow's craven face with its dead, cold, opaque eyes she glanced down at the length of cord he carried.

"Aie! Aie! You'll not be strangling the poor little lamb!" she whispered, frightened and trembling, and strove to place her palsied hand on his arm.

"Out of my way, hag!" he muttered angrily and shoved her aside so that she tottered against the wall moaning and wringing her hands.

Lady Yolanda rose from the divan at sound of that moan and stared at the closed door. Before her eyes the door handle began to turn slowly and relentlessly and the door opened inch by inch on its creaking hinges.

At sight of the figure that stood there she turned white and a low gasp broke from her lips as she stared at that which he carried in his hands.

Her own hands flew to the smooth perfection of her throat as she stood there horror-stricken.

AT first sight of those gleaming pools of silver amongst the trees Rafael had lowered the visor of his helmet and slipped sword silently from scabbard. Dim seen in the forest road ahead of him appeared more and more men, most of them mounted, but a few on foot.

It was from one of these latter that there came a squeak of a cross-bow being wound. From what he could see of them Rafael quickly judged them to be a band of those masterless *condottieri,* mercenary soldiery seeking employment from some nobleman and meanwhile roving about robbing and slaying at will. The mere fact that he was a knight would not save him from such as these, for they would slay him ruthlessly for the sake of the armor he wore and the horse he bestrode.

Behind him grew ever louder the thunder of the pursuing men-at-arms. The soldiers before him crept ever closer, the cross-bowman making shift to aim his piece. Suddenly Rafael shouted aloud:

"Ho! Dogs, wouldst interfere with an emissary of Cesare Borgia's?" he thundered, and then as they paused irresolute—"If you would gain a great reward hold me these people who follow after and come to Cesare Borgia for your pay!"

It was a name to make men pause in these troublous times, and the sight of that red and yellow surcoat which Rafael still wore, gave them more food for thought. The cross-bowman lowered his piece irresolute. The thunder of the pursuing force grew ever louder.

Of a sudden before ever the men who opposed him grasped his intention, Rafael clapped spurs to his horse. The beast was among them in a second.

"Make way, dogs, and do as you are bid!" shouted Rafael, and struck with the flat of his blade at the nearest. A cross-bow bolt clanged against his helmet and glanced off harmless. There was a sudden flash of steel in the moonlight as he rose in his stirrups and whirled his great sword about his head. Men gave back before him and in another second he had galloped through the press, scattering them, his horse spurning the earth in great strides as he bore away.

Behind him he heard shouts and a clang of steel as the band of marauding soldiery, roused to action, arrested the course of the pursuing horsemen, unaware of their strength or numbers.

PRAISING the saints for the brief respite thus gained, Rafael sped ever toward his goal, coming at last to the open plain at the far end of which rose the hill crowned by the

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crouching bulk of the Castle of the Black Bull.

It lay dark and silent with but a single light agleam in a high tower, and he fixed his eyes upon this light as the desolate moor flashed by him on either side.

Dimmer to the rear grew the sound of combat and ever he pressed his horse to fresh effort. The great beast responded nobly, the swiftness of its progress making the night air to beat upon Rafael's face.

Now they were across the meadow and at the foot of the hill. Up this winding road Rafael pushed his mount, listening ever behind him to the sound of that combat which a shift in the wind brought more loudly to his ears.

Above him the grim walls of the castle frowned down in silent watchfulness, and it was as though he were watched by unseen eyes as he mounted upward and ever upward, his gallant horse laboring at the steepness of the ascent.

There was a warning challenge and a gleam of metal in the moonlight as he came to level going and galloped straight for the castle gate. The drawbridge was up, as might be expected at this hour of the night. Undaunted thereby, Rafael reined his horse in at the brink of the moat.

"Ho, within there!" he shouted thunderously.

"Fling open your gates and call out your men! Lord Malatesta is sore beset in the woods on the far side of the meadow. Speed ye to him ere he be overborne!"

A torch appeared on the battlements above. Men-at-arms peered stupidly down at him and then raised their heads to listen to the clamor of the combat in the woods, a clamor that was growing louder minute by minute.

CHAPTER IX.

THE JEST.

WHITE-FACED and stricken, Lady Yolanda stared at the hang-dog face and averted eyes of Roderigo Scapponi, who advanced upon her with crouching step, his length of cord hanging from his left hand.

"Whence come you and what means this intrusion?" She heard her voice coming as from a vast distance, and wondered at the sound of it.

"Your pardon, my lady," mumbled Roderigo, his eyes ever lowered as he crept nearer, anxious to be at the job and have it done with.

Lady Yolanda gazed with loathing and horror on his slinking figure, knowing full well that death lay clenched between those two hands of his, but fighting against that thought as she strove to halt his progress.

"Your master, Malatesta, hath sent thee against me," she said swiftly. "Were it not better to pause a second and reflect that I could reward thee heavily for thy forbearance?"

The man made no reply, still crept ever closer and ever closer until he was now halfway across the room.

"Hold but a moment," cried Lady Yolanda, "and reflect upon what thou art about to do! Dost know that my death will be avenged, that thou wilt be hunted down like a dog and put to the torture?"

The man glanced at her under lowered eyebrows, something like a faint sneer appearing on his face.

She clasped her hands in anguish. Neither hope of reward nor fear of

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punishment s w a y e d this implacable beast before her. She shrank back until her trembling form was pressed against the farthest wall, but ever the man came on, his fingers opening and closing as though already at their grisly task.

Of a sudden a gray shadow flitted in through the doorway and there fell upon Lady Yolanda's gaze the bent frame of the old tire-woman, Marie, carrying something which gleamed in her hand. The old woman, with an agility surprising in one of her years, suddenly hurled herself at the back of the strangler. The fellow emitted a deep-mouthed oath and, stumbling backward, nigh lost his balance. The old woman drew back her arm for another blow, when he turned upon her savagely, striking and beating until she cowered down helpless, her dagger tinkling to the stone floor, striving to protect her face from the rain of blows which descended upon her, a rain of blows and kicks that at last beat her to the floor helpless and unconscious.

Turning, he picked up the cord which he had dropped in the struggle, and stepped over the quivering body of the old woman, his eyes burning with anger and his slinking frame more resilient, to finish the task at hand.

Lady Yolanda dropped her hands to her sides and gazed upon him with naught of her despair showing, but with all the pride of a daughter of the Baglione, unafraid to meet her death. Scarce but a scant pace or two separated them, and she had closed her eyes against the horror that she could not bear to envision.

The man lengthened his cord and drew it back to cast about her slim white neck, but paused midway in the gesture.

From the courtyard below came loud shouts and the running of many feet. There followed the clinking sound made by the lowering of the drawbridge and the resounding thump as its farther end l a n d e d against the moat.

Lady Yolanda, roused on a sudden to new life, sprang aside and ran to the window. From its barred opening she screamed aloud a single word, nor knew that she had cried the name: "Rafael!"

The assassin paused irresolute a second, not knowing what this might portend, and listened while the clamor from below deepened in volume, but it was only for a s e c o n d that he paused.

Undoubtedly, he reasoned, it was his master returning, and his task must be finished ere Malatesta saw him again. Growling deep in his throat like some wolf, he turned and strode for Lady Yolanda, his hands outstretched to grasp her.

Quite swiftly she eluded his questing fingers and ran past him, striving to seize the dagger that lay on the floor near the outstretched arm of the old tire-woman.

Roderigo l a u g h e d a short, ugly laugh and leaped to forestall her.

WHO this strange knight below the gate could be the guards did not know. But in the flare of their cressets they saw the red and yellow surcoat of the Borgias, and reasoned that it was an emissary from the ally of their master.

Certes there was little time to delay, for the clamor of fighting grew ever louder on the far side of the meadow below the castle. If their lord was beset, swift and sure would be their punishment did they fail him.

Suddenly the drawbridge began to

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descend, accompanied by the creak and clank of rusted chains, dropping at last with a thud against the outer edge of the moat and bouncing slightly at the impact.

Scarcely had it touched the moat's edge, when Rafael leaped his horse upon it and thundered across, waiting for the slow gates to widen enough to permit him to enter the castle courtyard. In another few seconds he was within the courtyard.

"Make haste!" he shouted. "Turn out every man ere it be too late!" The small garrison left behind to hold the castle became infected by the excitement in his voice, and men, half-roused from slumber, came tumbling out, hastily donning breast plates and morions and trailing sword and halberd after them.

Under the strident voice of a sergeant they began to stream out the open gate, paying little heed to Rafael, who leaped from the saddle nigh the stone steps that led into the hall, secured his horse's reins in a convenient ring and rushed inside. Several men-at-arms bore past him, and to them he shouted orders to hurry.

He sought and found the staircase leading to the tower where he had seen that single light gleaming forth. A man-at-arms barred his passage with a halberd, but Rafael leaped at him, smiting with his great sword so that the fellow tumbled in a groaning welter of quick-springing blood.

On went Rafael, taking the stairs two at a time, when suddenly his ears were smitten by a scream in a voice he knew.

It was as though the sound put wings on his feet, and swift as an arrow he sped up those remaining steps, coming at last to an open doorway where another man-at-arms stood, back toward him, peering in at some scene taking place within.

The fellow turned with Rafael's point at his throat and went down like a pole-axed ox in a clatter of steel.

Through an empty anteroom Rafael burst and came to another open doorway where he halted for a second to take in the confusion before him.

As he appeared in the doorway he saw the Lady Yolanda being forced to her knees and struggling against a man whom Rafael vaguely recognized.

The fellow turned at his shout and his face was stricken white as he saw death advancing upon him. There came a thud as of steel piercing flesh and bone and a mortal scream of agony as the assassin went down.

For a swift second the trembling form of Lady Yolanda tottered against the knight in black armor, reassured by the voice that came through the steel bars of his visor. Then he turned, and swinging her about, fled down the steps.

There were none in the great hall as the two hurried through it and they saw no living thing until they came to the courtyard where one or two lackeys and a kitchen wench stared dumbly at them as Rafael swung Lady Yolanda lightly up onto the horse. Untethering the reins he followed up after her and rode across to the gate.

Two men at arms left behind raised their halberds uncertainly, but these Rafael shoved aside and thundered across the drawbridge.

With his horse slipping down the steep road, he speeded away from that place of ill-omen. In the moonlight he saw the men at arms of the castle, a score and a half or less, straggling along across the moor.

Rather than follow them and run into his enemies again, he swung his

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horse to the left around the edge of the trees.

MOUNTED men began tumbling out of the woods across the moor and suddenly he was sighted. A great shout went up and Rafael's heart sank as he saw the huge and shapeless form of Malatesta directing his men at the quarry.

Striking more deeply into the woods, Rafael laid a course that should bring him past his enemies and lead back toward the city and castle.

Around about him he heard the crashing of the horses of his pursuers and swung Lady Yolanda behind him, bidding her cling to his belt and leave his sword arm free.

In an open glade before him appeared three mounted men, wearing the black and orange of the Malatesta livery. They made shift to bring their lances into play, but Rafael deflected the lance tips and drove among them, smiting with his great sword and scattering them as he rode down the forest glade.

But the hue and cry was on. Loud and ever louder grew the shouts and crashings of the pursuers. They seemed before and behind and on all sides of him.

He came at last to a small meadow. As he started to ride across it, past a wood-cutter's cabin, men burst out of the woods ahead. From the right a great shout went up from Malatesta, who galloped into view. The shout was reëchoed by the deep voice of Ramiro Lorques who saw his quarry in view at last.

There was no escape from that clearing. Lunging at an over-courageous man at arms, Rafael swung his horse sharply to the right and drew rein before the wood-cutter's cabin.

Here he leaped from the saddle and bade Lady Yolanda drop into his arms. Her he thrust inside the door and stood at bay, his naked blade gleaming in his hand.

There came thundering at him from halfway across the meadow the huge bulk of Ascanio Malatesta on his great horse, his lance in rest.

Leaping nimbly to one side as the questing lance tip sought his heart, Rafael slashed low, bringing the horse down with a scream. Ascanio rolled over once and lurched to his feet, dragging at his sword.

His blade leaped out and rang against Rafael's length of steel. Naught but the gross form of Ascanio could Rafael see in his rage and his sword leaped in and out, seeking, ever seeking for the joint in Ascanio's armor that should spell his death nor saw the ringed mass of enemies closing in upon him and creeping around the edges of the cabin.

Suddenly a treacherous hand grasped his ankle and he reeled to the earth with a crash, still struggling, as men bound his hands.

ASCANIO made ready to give the final thrust, when Ramiro Lorques's voice halted him.

"By your leave," he said, "I would not see this dog killed so quickly," and turned to where Rafael sat on the ground, half-dizzy from the sudden fall.

"Ho, my foxlike friend!" cried Ramiro Lorques. "We have caught up with thee at last! Great sport will it be to see thee die!"

"So?" replied Rafael, quiet-voiced. "Mayhap my time to die hath not yet come!"

"Have no fear on that score, my friend," Ramiro Lorques reassured

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him heartily. "What think you, Malatesta, of tricing him to yon tree and building a slow fire under him? 'Twill be rare sport to watch him squirm."

"Aye," grunted Malatesta, passing through the cabin door. While men brought a rope and firewood, Malatesta waddled back out of the door, dragging the Lady Yolanda by the wrist and gloating over her pale beauty.

"I have only one request to make of thee, Ramiro Lorques," said Rafael.

"Ho, a request! I pray thee let us hear it." The black-bearded Sicilian stood with elbows akimbo, a taunting look in his eyes as he gazed down at his prisoner who glanced from time to time at the edge of the woods surrounding the clearing.

"Aye, a request that you do no harm to Lady Yolanda."

"That I cannot promise thee," returned Ramiro Lorques, chuckling in great glee; "hath any more requests to make ere I have thee swung from yon tree?"

"Aye," returned Rafael, "that I be spared the sight of thy smirking face for the few minutes that are left thee."

"The few minutes that are left *me!*" exclaimed Ramiro Lorques in surprise. "You grow tiresome, my friend. Put me this rope about him and lead him to the tree!" he ordered the waiting men at arms who strode forward obediently to do as they had been ordered.

Rafael laughed. There was something so unexpected and so strange in that laughter that men paused.

"'Tis useless to waste your time with that rope," he said, "unless it be your wish to put it about the fat neck of yon Malatesta," and he laughed again as at a huge joke. "Look you, Ramiro Lorques; I have but jested with thee again. There was need to draw thee and Malatesta away from the city and the two of thee art fallen into the trap most beautifully. Look you, Ramiro Lorques, at the woods' edge!"

And there was much to see at the woods' edge, for there came a trampling of iron-shod hoofs and the gleam of steel in the moonlight and Carlo Febbri galloped forth, his two hundred men at arms at his back spread out in a long line that circled about the clearing and drew in like the edges of a steel net.

"Let this be a lesson to you, Ramiro Lorques, the next time you take the word of a spy be sure that I have not already left secret instructions, word whereof he fails to bring to you!" Rafael glanced up at Carlo Febbri who had well carried out his orders to follow along behind.

Be it said that those forty men at arms of Ramiro Lorques's and Malatesta's forces went down fighting, but little good came of it, for at the last Malaesta and Lorques, their arms bound behind them, were led away while Rafael with his force rode up to secure possession of the Castle of the Black Bull before returning to raise the siege of the Lady Yolanda's still beleaguered city.

"Of a surety," laughed Rafael as they rode into the courtyard, Lady Yolanda at his side, "of a surety we have a deal of trouble in getting married. Can we not accomplish this without need of that trousseau you so ardently desire?"

But whether or no a man who could conquer castles, succeeded in changing a woman's will in regard to her trousseau, history does not relate.

THE END.

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His despairing shout was unheeded

Whaling Blood

Whales are dangerous playfellows, but human sharks can be even more deadly, Wesley Watson learns when he is shanghaied aboard his own whaling ship

By DON WATERS

Author of "The Spark of Life," "Winner Take All," etc.

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

WESLEY WATSON, twenty-three-year-old heir of the whaling ships under the blue house flag of the Watson line, had never given more than idle thought to the square-riggers which supported him, until failing profits and the fearful hints of a faithful old clerk, Charles, led him to demand an accounting from his agent, Amos Tumbrill, and his trustee, Abner Miller.

They promise him an accounting next day—and that night he is knocked out while he is waiting in the dark to elope with Prudence Hathaway (whose father had demanded that Wesley should first prove he could work).

Wesley comes to, shanghaied aboard his own ship, the Anne Elizabeth. Ragged and disheveled, his claim to being Wesley Watson is laughed at by

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Captain Talbot (Tumbrill's cousin) and the first mate, Silva, who Wesley suspects was one of his kidnapers. They swear he signed on as William Williams.

Forced to work, Wesley toughens under the discipline of the whaler. Ben Earle, an old salt, helps him. They plan to escape; but no opportunity offers. Wesley is aloft when he sights the first school of sperm whales. In Silva's boat, he is one of the first to reach the school—but their harpooner misses his cast, and the enraged whale's flukes lash out and knock mast and sail overboard.

CHAPTER V.

MYSTERIOUS ACTIONS.

WESLEY never knew how he did it. Without thinking, he jumped up, g r a b b e d the second harpoon, lifted it high above his head and drove it with all his might into the black carcass of the whale, right behind the fin.

The mate, S i l v a, was yelling: "Oars! Oars! Starna, starna, all for your life!"

Somehow, some way, the excited crew got the oars shipped and backed off. The whale was threshing wildly around, smashing the sea with his flukes, diving and reappearing in frantic lunges.

The mate nodded his head toward Wesley. "Gooda work," he said, pointing in front.

Wesley looked. Up from the spout hole of the whale a tuft of vapor arose, blood red, a crimson mist followed by a blob of gore. With a few last struggles, the big body quieted, rolled over on its side, and lay fin out and dead. By a lucky stroke, Wesley had driven the harpoon into a vital spot, and killed his first whale.

The harpooner came to. One of his arms hung limp and dangling. He'd been struck a hard smash, and Wesley saw from the way the man slowly and painfully raised himself up on one elbow that he was hurt internally. There was no time then to take care of him.

At the end of five fathom of whale line, led on by a plunging, maddened beast, Captain Talbot's boat skittered across the sea in a wide sweep as the whale he was fastened to began to run. It was coming straight for the boat that Wesley was in. Blindly, the whale forged along, his big shovel-nose head, as wide as a barn door, raised well out of the water, his threshing flukes behind churning the sea like a half-submerged propeller. The whale line that stretched between him and the boat was as taut as a fiddle string. With the speed of an express train he approached, blind to everything but the harpoon that was sticking its shaft up out of his side.

Captain Talbot stood up in the boat, waving his arms, yelling. Fifty yards away, the flash of the sun on a brass bomb gun showed in the captain's hand. There was a bang! A loud crash sounded. The line that stretched taut flew up in the air in twists and coils, snake like. The captain had shot off his own line.

Without waiting for orders, Wesley picked up the hatchet lying beside him, cut his line, threw a square knot in it onto the piece of rope that was hitched onto the spare harpoon. Not five feet in front of him, Captain Talbot's whale was passing. Wesley threw the iron. It struck, and a second later the boat was jerked around and started forward. The mate took a couple of turns around the loggerhead. With a

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square of canvas on his hand, he nipped the whale line and kept a strain on it as it flaked out of the tub. The line smoked around the locust post. One of the men bailed water onto it from his hat to keep it from igniting. It ran fast around the loggerhead, stretched hard and taut, spun forward between the rowers, and whizzed out through the notch in the bow of the boat.

There was nothing to be seen, for the boat was enveloped in a blinding spray of salt water from its own rapid progress. For five minutes the whale ran, then even his terrific strength began to feel the strain. He slowed down.

"Haula, haula line!" the mate yelled.

The men grasped the water soaked whale line. Foot by foot they pulled up on the whale.

The mate called to Wesley: "Taka da oar!" and he went forward to lance.

Wesley went back to the steering oar, his breath coming fast with excitement, and watched the mate. When the crew had hauled the boat up to within twenty feet of the whale, Silva pitched the lance. He hauled it back with the short line attached to it.

"Puta me closer," he ordered.

THE second cast found the mark. The sea reddened as the mate threw his lance again and again. When the iron shaft became bent, he straightened it against the gunwale with blows from a mallet kept there for that purpose. The whale was tiring fast now from his exertions and loss of blood. He forged slowly along, leaving a crimson streak in the sea behind him. They hauled the boat close alongside. The mate drove his lance into the black body beside them, churned it up and down, searching for the "life." A red mist welled out from the spout hole.

The crew backed the boat off, and the leviathan of the deep went into his flurry. Round and round he went in a narrowing circle, threshing the water into foam. Slower and slower he moved, till finally with a last gigantic struggle he seemed to stand on his head. His big flukes waved futilely back and forth in the air. He toppled over dead, struck the water with a loud splash.

Wesley had time to look around him now. One of the other boats had fastened to a whale. Captain Talbot's boat was far out in front, chasing the frightened school that was going fast to windward. In the flash of the sun on the oars when the men caught and recovered, the boat looked like some many-legged water beetle, crawling across the face of the sea.

The mate planted a blue flag fastened on a bamboo pole into the whale's body. They rowed a short distance to the other floating carcass and wefted it, too; then they headed toward the ship that was approaching them under short sail. Not till then did the groaning boatsteerer on the floor boards receive any attention. The crew rowed to the ship, the boatsteerer was put aboard, and the mate's boat returned to where the blue flags fluttered in the breeze.

Captain Talbot soon gave up the futile chase. The whales, now thoroughly gallied, were forging along half submerged, "shoveling junk" at a pace far faster than any boat's crew could hope to equal.

Tired from their long row, the captain's crew pulled back to where the whales' big black bodies heaved up and down like half tide rocks, floating

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fin out on the surface of the sea. The carpenter and sailmaker, the cook and his helper, left aboard the ship, had taken in most of the canvas, and the Anne Elizabeth was hove to under backed topsails a mile away. Captain Talbot ordered one of the mate's boats to fasten on ahead of him. Another towed before the second mate's boat. A line was hitched to the whales and the five boats began their slow haul back to the ship.

The boat that Wesley was in was towing single. All efforts of the officers and the captain were directed toward getting the whales alongside the ship. That seemed to Wesley the longest mile he had ever traveled. Pull and recover—the long blades seemed to puddle the same hole they had made last stroke. The dead inert sixty-foot carcass of the whale behind moved sluggishly. They were an hour and a half getting it up alongside the ship. Wesley's hands blistered. The blisters broke, and his raw palms burned like fire.

WHEN they got to the vessel, Wesley breathed a great sigh of relief, thinking that now he would have a chance to rest his sore hands and tired back. But there was no rest for any one then. The other four boats already had their whales fastened alongside. The boats had to be hoisted to their davits, the tubs of line set out. Then a big block was hauled aloft to the main top, a heavy hawser rove through it with a hook on the lower block.

The whales were alongside, each held by a chain around its flukes, leading forward through the hawsepipes. The cutting in started. A section of the bulwarks was removed, and the cutting stage rigged. This consisted of two boards fastened to the rail, sticking out from the ship's side about ten feet. Another board was lashed lengthwise across these, and the whole held up by lines rove through blocks and hooked one end to the fore and main shrouds, the other to the outside plank.

Out on the platform, with only a single pole braced waist high upright to steady them, three of the mates wielded their long-handled cutting spades which looked like big chisels set in the ten-foot ash handles. A hole was chopped in the whale's carcass near the eye. After many attempts the big blubber hook was set in it, and the tired men at the forward windlass took up on the fall lines. The blanket pieces, big strips of blubber eight inches thick and five or six feet wide, were stripped off in long spirals as the whale was rolled over in the water.

When they had hauled up a strip ten or twelve feet long, it was cut off and a new hold was taken with another line. The falls were slacked down and, heave and pull, the work went on. After the carcass had been stripped, the head of the whale was cut off. It was upended, a hole chopped in the gory mass, and buckets on long poles shoved down into the head were hauled out full of a white, greasy, fibrous substance, the spermaceti. This was known as the case oil, and the cavity in the whale's head from which it was extracted was called the case.

It was noon that day before the first whale had been cut in, and the blanket pieces piled up on the deck. A man got down into the head alongside and finished baling the case. He was oil soaked from head to foot when he finally drained it to Captain Talbot's satisfaction.

The carcass was cast adrift. A swirl

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of sharks below bit and tore at it; above, a cloud of sea birds wheeled and screamed over the stripped body as it drifted slowly astern. The crew were a greasy looking lot when they knocked off for dinner. Sitting with his back against the bulwarks, his tin plate of salt horse in his lap, nibbling on a wormy sea biscuit, Wesley thought he would never be able to last out the day. Several times that afternoon he was on the point of quitting from sheer weariness. He but shared the feeling of the whole foremast crew.

AS they worked on the second whale, stripping off the blubber, one of the men stepped back from the winch, sat down on the heel of the bowsprit, muttering as he breathed heavily: "I'm done for, I gotta rest."

He soon changed his mind when the fourth mate noticed him, and laid a rope's end vigorously across his back. The weary crew hauled and slacked; the cutting spades chopped at the carcass below them. The water around reddened with blood, its surface dotted with white pieces of floating fat. The sharks appeared in ever increasing numbers, drawn to the feast by the smell of blood. These ravenous wolves of the sea dashed in and out, grabbing big chunks of blubber from the carcass of the whale at every rush. The blanket pieces began to come up well bitten.

Wesley was relieved to get away from the windlass when one of the mates ordered him out on the cutting stage with a spade to try and keep the sharks off. He took a savage exultation in wielding that sharp-edged blade down at the pack that swirled through the water below, attracted by the streak of froth and blood that trailed behind across the ocean. This was much easier than pumping at the windlass, yet he welcomed the coming of darkness and the sight of the mess boy going forward with the two wooden kits that held the crew's supper.

But even nightfall did not stop the work. Big wire baskets were hung in the rigging, and to the ends of the yardarms. These baskets were filled with pieces of blubber. They were lighted, and by their flickering, wind-swept flare the work went on.

Wesley was thrusting his spade at the phosphorescent streaks below, half asleep from fatigue, when he was startled out of his lethargy by a sudden sharp ejaculation. Mr. Silva stood looking down at the body of the whale below, mouth agape, eyes wide in amazement.

He turned to Wesley. "Go call cap'n, quick!" he ordered.

Wesley made his way to the rail, wondering what was up. When he battered on the captain's door, and informed him that he was wanted by the first mate at once, he was surprised at the alacrity with which his request was answered. Without waiting to put on his hat or shoes, Captain Talbot brushed past him and went up the stairs in his stocking feet, two steps at a jump.

Wesley followed, wondering at the hurry. The captain went out on the cutting stage. After a few minutes of low talk between him and the mates, the welcome order rang out: "All hands go below!"

The men were not long in obeying, and stretched out on their bunks they made the most of their resting period. Sitting on the edge of his berth, Wesley wondered dully why the crew had so abruptly been relieved of duty. What had caused this sudden halt in

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the cutting in? But he was too tired to care much. He stretched himself out on his berth. His leaden eyelids closed, and he was asleep in a few minutes.

An hour later, the sleeping men below were roused out, and the interrupted job was again started. When Wesley got out on the platform he noticed that the carcass of the whale had been split open. The case was baled on the second whale, and cutting in started on the last one as eight bells struck. It was midnight, and eight bells had struck again when the job was completed, and a weary crew tumbled into their bunks. None made any effort to remove their grease-soaked clothing. Almost as soon as they struck their straw-filled mattresses they fell asleep.

IT seemed to Wesley that he had hardly closed his eyes when he was wakened by a loud thumping on the hatch above.

As though from a far distance, he heard: "Hey, you, dere, Williams! Come up. Cap'n wanta you."

Sleepily he rolled out of the bunk, crawled up the forecastle stairs and blinked in the glare of the morning sunlight. He made out the captain's figure, standing aft under the gallows frame beside the cook house, a small black book in his hand.

Wesley climbed over the slippery, greasy pile of blubber that slithered back and forth on the deck with every roll of the ship.

"Yes, sir," he addressed the captain. "You wanted me?"

The captain surveyed him for a few minutes, and then said coldly: "That clumsy fool of a boatheader who got himself hurt yesterday, he's—" He did not finish the sentence. "You take his place."

Wesley stood, hardly knowing what to say.

"Move lively now," the captain ordered. "Get your things and come aft."

It seemed to Wesley that the captain's tone was ironical as he informed him of his promotion. Wesley looked hard at the man. The corners of Captain Talbot's mouth were puckered up as though he secretly were enjoying some grim joke.

He turned his back on Wesley and spoke: "Mr. Silva, muster up the crew."

With muttered curses the crew responded and, standing on the blubber that filled the waist of the ship, each man looked his sullen wonder at the summons. A hush of expectancy hung over them. They knew the blubber was all to handle, to cut up and stow below, yet there was no move made toward starting work on it.

THEY were not kept long in doubt. The third and fourth mates came up from below, carrying a long canvas-covered bundle between them. Wesley shuddered at the sight of it. He knew what it was. The injured boat-steerer had died during the night. There was little ceremony in disposing of the body. A couple of boards were laid across the rail; the canvas bundle was placed on them. The captain mumbled a few words of the burial service from the black book.

His voice raised: "And now we consign his body to the deep."

The planks were tilted. The canvas-covered bundle slid into the sea with a splash. Just as the gruesome-looking roll of soiled and dirty canvas started to slide overboard, the cook, standing near by, picked up a bucket half full of slops and slushed it over the corpse.

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Wesley gasped, horrified at this insult to the dead, but Ben, beside him, said:

"It did not hurt yon poor soul, who is plunging down now to his last rest, and it eases the mind of the crew."

"How?" Wesley stammered.

Ben smiled grimly. "His ghost will never come back to haunt the ship now, fearing, they think, another dose from the slop bucket."

At that time Wesley had no chance for further words.

Captain Talbot turned on his heel, called over his shoulder as he went below:

"Get some sail on her, Mr. Silva, and put the men to work."

The mates barked out their orders, and the Anne Elizabeth, that had been hove to while the brief ceremony took place, again spread her canvas and dipped and rolled across the quiet sea.

Wesley was depressed and aghast at the callousness of the whole affair. Human life was cheap aboard the Anne Elizabeth—cheap, and due but scant respect.

Ben voiced the same thoughts that Wesley was milling over in his mind: "Aye, lad, the captain is not a bit put out when a man goes over the side. That's one less share for him to have to calculate against."

Ben's expression became serious. "Lad, if what ye've told me is true about who ye are, and how ye came aboard, I've a notion there's something in the wind that concerns ye. Keep yer wits about ye, or mayhap ye'll be the next one to go over the rail wi' a rock at yer feet to help ye down. We've got ile aboard, not overly much, but a good start and a promise o' more. The more we get, the less the afterguard will worry when they lose one o' the ship's company."

His face grew thoughtful. "I have no doubt but what before this cruise is ended, Cap'n Talbot will pass the orders to serve us belayin'-pin hash and knuckle-duster soup. Aye, and make life so miserable for us all that not a man in the fo'c's'le but what will jump ship when the chance offers."

Ben laughed ironically. "Aye, and when they get us all worked up, they'll give us that chance. When the Anne Elizabeth returns home, if they have their way, there'll be none to tell o' how William Williams came aboard, nor the manner o' his leavin'."

CHAPTER VI.

SEA TREASURE.

ALL hands were kept busy now with the blubber from three whales aboard. The big blanket pieces that covered the main deck were chopped into smaller chunks, the "horse pieces," and slid below into the hold. A dangerous job this, chopping the tough hide of the whales, the men barefooted, the deck slithery as new ice with the gurry of water and grease that covered it six inches deep. For the scuppers had been plugged to prevent any of the oil from draining overboard.

At noon the tryworks were started. The covers were taken off the big iron kettles that set in their brick framework aft of the foremast. A fire was lit. Some of the scrap, fritters of parched blubber, the residue that had been saved after trying out from the last voyage, was fed to the fires. A slicing knife was rigged, and the horse pieces were sliced as a strip of bacon is cut. These were called "Bibles." With the "leaves" notched into them, held together by the skin, they were

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forked into the kettles, and trying out began.

Dense clouds of black smoke rolled up from the tryworks. The soot rained in big flakes over everything aboard as the work of trying out got to going in earnest. When the crisp pieces of blubber turned brown and floated to the surface after the greater part of the oil had been abstracted from them, this scrap was skimmed off the top and used to feed the fire below. The whales furnished the fuel for their own rendering.

All that day the crew sliced horse pieces, passed up chunks of blubber from the hold, drew off the oil, and ran it into the casks below. When night fell the Anne Elizabeth was a weird and unearthly sight, with the red flames shooting up from the tryworks, the huge baskets of oil-soaked scrap hung above. The flickering light danced over the men working below, bobbing around, sliding and falling on the slippery decks.

The ship was in the middle of the South Atlantic now, out of the traffic lanes. Ben, speaking to Wesley during a breathing spell while they worked at the slicing knife, remarked, "'Tis well that we are far from the usual track of vessels, or in all likelihood there'd be more than one that would crowd on sail and come down to rescue us, thinking we were a ship on fire." He chuckled. "And cussing us for a filthy, floating butcher shop when they discovered their mistake."

When morning came half of the crew were sent below to rest, and the other half continued on duty. So, turn and turn about, four hours on and four hours off, the watches were kept till the last greasy chunk came up from below, was sliced and pitched into the boiling pots. The ship itself was a gory mess, from the bowsprit to the boat that hung over the stern aft, greasy with oil, sticky with smudge of lampblack from the soot of the tryworks. When the last drop of oil had been drained into the barrels below, the orders came to clean ship.

For three days the crew, with broom and mop, scraper and scrubbing brush, worked to rid the vessel of its encrustation of filth and gurry. That done, discipline was relaxed. A different spirit seemed to hang over the Anne Elizabeth. A more genial air of tolerance was evident now than had been since the first day she sailed from port. Captain Talbot once even broke into a snatch of song, and Wesley, during his steering trick, often heard him humming cheerily in his cabin below through the open skylight that lay in front of the wheel.

THEY had been profitable, these last few days, as Wesley learned from the dinner table conversation of the mates. Over a hundred and sixty barrels of oil had been taken. But Wesley found it hard to believe that this would account in whole for Captain Talbot's change of manner.

On the first Sunday after they had finished cleaning the vessel, the mess boy brought in plum duff for the afterguard. It was hailed with loud acclaim, a welcome change from the salt meat and sea biscuits. Wesley, who had been used to fine fare ashore, saw little to become enthusiastic over in a sticky mass of flour, seasoned with cinnamon and interspersed with chunks of dried apple. The fare on the mates' table was a little better than that served in the forecastle.

Now, instead of having to sweeten his coffee with molasses, there was a bowl of brown sugar on the table each

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meal. Instead of having to fish out his meat from the wooden mess kit, the cook's assistant brought it in and served it in a more civilized fashion.

He had more leisure now, for the boat-steerers were spared the task of tarring down rigging, holystoning decks and working up old rope. During their spare time, they could amuse themselves as they saw fit.

Wesley and the boat-steerer in the second mate's boat soon became friends. Cortez Allen was a young man who had been brought up on Cuttyhunk, accustomed to the sea. He had handled a tiller when most boys were playing with rocking horses. He was ambitious and he confided to Wesley that he was studying navigation, and in time hoped to become an officer—"an officer with a rating and a ticket, for any ship of any tonnage in any ocean."

From Cortez Allen, Wesley learned the knack of scrimshawing. When once they had put their boats in order, seen that the lances and harpoons were in good shape, and the sails and rigging all ready for a quick setting up, the boat-steerers had little to do. They took the wheel and steered the vessel turn and turn about. They were the first up the rigging, and handled the clews far out on the ends of the yardarms in reefing. But in the calm, fine weather that the Anne Elizabeth now enjoyed, steering was a light job and it was seldom necessary to go aloft to shorten sail.

Before the last whale's head had been cast adrift, the mates had cut off the lower jaw. It had been towing from a rope alongside since then. It was hauled aboard now, and the teeth extracted. During their spare time the officers sat in the shade on the deck, scrimshawing. The solid chunks of ivory from these sperm whale tushes were a couple of inches in diameter and about six inches long. Their smooth polished surface made a good background. Whaling scenes, "The Sailor's Return," "Full and By," "The Chase," and "Trying Out," were drawn on the teeth, and the outlines of these favorite pictures carved out. A little oil and lampblack were rubbed into the tush and, with cameo-like sharpness, the scenes stood out clearly.

CORTEZ and Wesley sat together one day, a week after Wesley had come aft. It was a quiet afternoon. The sails were sleeping lazily, and the Anne Elizabeth was barely under steerage way. Captain Talbot came up from below, beckoned to the four mates. They followed him down into his cabin. Wesley looked questioningly at Cortez, who grinned knowingly.

"You wonder what they do? Remember that night when all foremast hands were sent below? Do you recall how you killed that whale with the first stroke of your harpoon?"

Wesley nodded.

"Well," the other went on, "'tis no secret now what they are conferring over. That was a sick whale. It came over me at the time that he was easily killed. Not five minutes passed after you struck him with the iron before he went into his flurry and rolled over, fin out and dead. He had a big chunk of ambergris in him, and ambergris is worth lots of money. I've heard it said that now it brings all of a hundred dollars an ounce. And I have no doubt but what there were many pounds in that chunk."

Cortez winked slyly. "Slip quietly to the skylight," he said, "and look

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below. Mayhap you'll hear or see something to satisfy your curiosity. I'll keep watch above here, and if any one starts out, I'll warn you in time so they will not be able to catch you eavesdropping."

Wesley laid down a whale's tooth on which he had been carving, tiptoed across the deck. The skylight over Captain Talbot's room was open.

From below, he heard the captain's voice in a cautious tone: "Aye, a small fortune there. Look, it moves the bar at forty pounds."

Cautiously Wesley moved over, looked down through the crack at the end of the skylight. Below, he saw Captain Talbot and Mr. Silva standing beside a steelyard hung from the carline above them. On one end of the arm was a square of canvas tied by the corners. In it, Wesley could see a muddy gray substance which looked like a piece of greasy clinker. Captain Talbot held a length of wire over the open flame of a sperm oil lamp. He thrust the hot wire into the lump of ambergris, held it to his nostrils.

"WHOOEE!" he whistled. "Prime stuff, this! A fair fortune it will bring when once the perfumers of Paris bid against each other for it."

Wesley had seen all he wanted to. He went back to where young Allen was seated, told him what he'd seen.

"Aye," the other remarked complacently. "What you heard was true. It's a very scarce thing, ambergris. They pay high prices for it. I've heard it said that its sole use is to fix the scent in perfume."

Cortez's face became thoughtful when Wesley asked, "But why are they so secretive about it? Why did the captain order all hands out of sight when they removed it from the whale?"

"That I cannot say," his companion answered. "It might be that the captain was afraid to excite the cupidity of the crew. There are a score of men forward, some of whom would go to any lengths, even murder and mutiny, to get their hands on a thing of that value. They outnumber the afterguard two to one, and it is well for the officers to watch that they do nothing which might cause trouble."

This explanation hardly satisfied Wesley, however, and in the days that followed he watched every move the captain and mates made in the hope that he would get further light on the suspicion that had entered his mind. But nothing untoward occurred. The ship was heading southwesterly across the middle passage, the slave route from the Ivory Coast of Africa to South America.

She worked across the doldrums, that belt of calms and baffling variable winds that extends from the coast of Africa eastward to South America. For a week the crew were kept busy pulling and hauling, canting the yards first one way, then the other, to catch ever vagrant breath of wind. Black squalls would make up suddenly, sweep down toward them, and when sail was shortened to meet them they would veer off to one side or the other, leaving the ship becalmed, slowly rocking up and down in the ground swell.

Ben was working up old rope into spun yarn with the rest of the crew on the deck one day, and Wesley got into conversation with him. It was the old sailor's opinion that the captain was heading for the Plate grounds, and from there, in all probability, he would set his course for Cape Horn and the Pacific.

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Next day they got to the edge of the southeast trade winds. The canvas that had been flapping impotently aloft, steadied, bulged out, and by noon the old craft forged with a free wind to the southwestward.

Up forward, the crew were chanteying: "'Oh, ho! oh, ho! We're bound for the Rio Grande!'" But if they were expecting shore liberty, they were to be disappointed. The course was changed to due south. Day by day the latitude increased, till the mouth of the Rio de la Plata lay to the north. Wesley had been buoying up his hopes with the idea that once the ship made port he would be the first to desert. He realized now that he was due for a long delay before that day arrived. This thought filled him with gloom, yet he did his work, never betraying his disappointment.

CHAPTER VII.

MAROONED.

THEY had not sighted whales for a week. Then, one morning, from aloft came the awakening cry of "Bl-o-o-ws! Ah, bl-o-o-ws!"

Again the boats swung out on the davits, hit the water and raced toward a big school of sperm whales that tufted the skyline with their puffs of vapor. That was a lucky day. Each boat fastened to a whale, made its kill. Wesley got on his first whale, pitched the harpoon, and changed places with the mate, who lanced the beast with little trouble. Inside ten minutes their second whale was harpooned, and before an hour had passed, Mr. Silva's boat had two whales to its credit.

Contrary to the way they usually acted, the whales did not become gallied and run to windward, but milled around in confusion, and the five boats each killed two. When night fell there were ten big bull sperm whales tied up alongside the Anne Elizabeth. The captain and the mates were jubilant over their success, but the crew viewed those inert carcasses alongside with disapproving eyes. They meant but hard work and short rests. Cutting in did not start till next morning, and the forecastle hands went at their heavy task gloomily, even after Captain Talbot had given each man a good tot of rum.

Pull and haul, the chop of the cutting spades, the singsong cries of "Slack!" and "Hold!" rang out for the rest of the week. That done, the tryworks were started and the ship by night was a lurid glow that lit up the ocean for miles around. By day, a pillar of sooty smoke drifted before the wind and spread fanwise across the clean horizon to leeward.

There were five hundred fresh barrels of oil in the casks below when the job was done, and the crew, who had eagerly looked forward to a period of rest, came in for another disappointment. The ship was made ready for the hard thresh against the prevailing westerlies around Cape Horn. All the spare gear on deck was stowed below. The royal yards and spars were struck. The boats were taken down from their davits and lashed securely to the top of the gallows frame. Heavy canvas was bent on, and everything movable on deck was fastened securely down.

As the days passed, the weather that had been clear and warm gradually changed. The southeast trades were left behind. One morning when Wesley came on deck he was surprised to see some of the crew sweeping off a light fall of snow that had descended during the night. The ocean was a

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moldy green. There was a shaking of heads when, one day, an albatross drifted over the ship.

A few days later all hands lined the rail to catch a glimpse of Staten Island, a gloomy, barren sight, snow and ice covered, that appeared and disappeared through the swirl of wind-blown snow which hung over it. The men began drawing on the slop chest. Woolen underwear and sea boots, mittens and jackets were in demand. Captain Talbot checked each article drawn against the man's lay.

WEARILY the Anne Elizabeth passed between Staten Island and the mainland of Tierra del Fuego, stood on a long leg to the south'ard, came about and edged across the wind to the northward.

Make westing—that was the sole thought in every one's mind now, make westing and clear this inhospitable region of white squalls that tore across the face of the water, shrieking like demons, of heavy gales and black skies, streaked with scudding storm wrack. Back and forth the Anne Elizabeth slugged, her progress punctuated by the *thump!* of floating pieces of ice as she shouldered them aside, and the mournful whine and groan of cold winds whistling through her rigging.

There was no fire on the ship save small ones in the captain's cabin and the cook shanty. The men went about their work, cold and soaking wet. The whaler rolled and pitched in the heavy seas. Time after time her decks were swept by big combers. Tons of water slushed across them, emptied out through the freeing ports, and she would roll down again, only to take another wave, solid green, four feet deep, that filled the waist bulwark high.

Life lines were rigged up so as to keep the men from being washed overboard. It seemed to some of them as though it would be a welcome relief to sweep off on the breast of a rolling grayback, and soon be beyond wet and cold, cracked and bleeding hands, and the misery of sodden bunks and icy wet garments. The cook's galley, lashed to the decks by chain and ringbolt, was swept crashing from its moorings one day. Even the small comfort of a hot meal was denied all hands now. Wesley, when he went below, was often tantalized by the odor of boiling coffee that came out of the captain's quarters. The master of the ship, warm and dry, cared little for the sufferings of his men.

For ten days they stood first on one tack, then on another. At every opportunity Captain Talbot took snapshots at the sun when it appeared momentarily through a break in the clouds. No one on board knew what progress they were making, except the captain, and he kept that information to himself. The thought struck Wesley that if anything should happen to the captain, the crew of the Anne Elizabeth would be in a desperate situation, since no one else aboard could take a sight and work out their position.

This was brought home forcibly to him one day when the captain was standing near the rail, squinting through the eyepiece of his sextant for a shot at the sickly yellow-looking globe of the sun, half obscured by the clouds. The first mate had just given the order to tack ship. The Anne Elizabeth eased her blunt nose around on the opposite tack, the spanker boom swung across with a clatter of blocks. A bight of the sheet caught the captain around the leg, and he fell heavily.

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Wesley, at the wheel, jumped to his assistance, threw the turn of rope off as it was tightening to the pull of the boom.

The captain got up slowly, and limped toward the companionway that led to his cabin, muttering as he gazed at the instrument in his hand: "Lucky I kept this out of harm."

THAT afternoon, Wesley went into Cortez's stateroom, a narrow cabin like his own on the port side of the vessel. There was but space in it for a berth, a chair and a small table. This was the first time Wesley had entered Cortez's quarters, and he looked around him with a good deal of interest. Everything was neat and clean.

There was a gayly colored patchwork quilt on the berth, pictures on the walls, a couple of shelves full of books against the end of the bulkhead over the berth. Cortez's shore clothes were carefully hung up. His shoes, well polished, stuck out from under his bed. The thought came over Wesley as he looked around the room that going to sea need not be the grim, disagreeable business which it was, that things might be as Cortez had them, and some of the comforts and niceties of home could be carried aboard. He glanced at the books, saw a volume on navigation.

To his question, could he borrow it, Cortez answered, "Certainly. But if you have an idea to study that, let's study it together." He winked. "I've a secret to tell you."

Reaching under his berth, he pulled out a mahogany sea chest, brass bound, opened the lid, turned back some clothes and drew out a wooden quadrant.

"No one but yourself knows I have this on board. Captain Talbot is jealous of his knowledge, and never tells even the first mate our position. But I have caught a sight often unbeknownst to him."

He nodded toward the porthole. "Whenever the ship is heading so that I can see the sun through the port at noon, I bring it down to calculate our latitude. The longitude I cannot get for two reasons. First, I have no chronometer, and cannot get the Greenwich time; and second," he admitted, "I have not yet acquired the knack of taking out the tangents and cotangents, secants and cosecants from the tables."

Wesley was glancing through the volume. He looked up. "Luckily," he said, "I was apt at mathematics when I went to school. Together we can work out these tables."

The two sat down on the edge of the berth, and in low tones went over the science of navigation as practiced and exemplified by Norie. By the time it was Wesley's turn to take his trick at the wheel, three hours later, he had an insight into the theory of celestial observations.

During the next week he devoted all his spare time to study, and before the Anne Elizabeth had worked her way, aided by a favorable slant of the wind, around Diego Ramirez Island, he had begun to get an inkling of what the practice of navigation at sea meant. They cleared the tip of Cape Horn one morning and stood off up the Pacific. All hands were delighted when that inhospitable region was put astern.

ONE noon, a week later, Captain Talbot came up on deck, took his sight, and went below. Wesley glanced around. Cortez had the deck watch. Ben was at the wheel. Here

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was a fine opportunity for him to try his newly acquired knowledge with a practical test. None of the mates were on deck. He hurried below, came out with the quadrant, and pointed the instrument at the sun.

It was a simple matter to slip the arm over the arc, bring the reflected image of that yellow globe down till its lower edge kissed the horizon. He bent over, studying the figures on the bone arc where the arm of the quadrant had stopped. Reading the altitude, he made his calculations with a bit of pencil on the deck.

"Forty-eight, fifty-six south latitude," he muttered.

He felt a heavy hand on his shoulder, a rough voice grated in his ear: "What's this? What are you up to?"

He jumped up to face the captain, who was studying his figures through narrowed eyes.

Captain Talbot reached for the quadrant, his face twisted in anger. "Give me that thing and I'll heave it overboard!"

Wesley held it behind him. "And why?" he asked. "What harm is there in it?"

"Harm! You ask me why?" Captain Talbot bellowed. "Obey my commands, or"—he grated his teeth together—"or we'll see how you like the taste o' bread and water!"

Wesley hesitated. He looked at the captain's threatening face, and then said quietly: "Captain Talbot, you have no right to destroy this instrument. I have done no harm in using it. I have as much right to know the position of this ship as you have."

"You! You talk about rights! You claim rights aboard!" the captain roared.

"Yes," Wesley replied, "I do. You know very well who I am. Of that I am certain. And I'm just as certain that you're implicated in the plot that put me aboard this vessel. There will be a reckoning some day, and when that day comes it might be well if at least I could state that you treated me with a decent consideration."

The two men stood facing each other, Wesley holding the quadrant in one hand. Unconsciously his other fist was clenched, his arm doubled up. His expression was fixed and determined. A half a head taller than Captain Talbot, Wesley was broad across the shoulders, deep-chested, and the muscles on his bare right arm rippled and played under his sun-varnished skin.

The Wesley Watson who had come aboard the Anne Elizabeth a half year before was no more. The puffiness in his cheeks had vanished. His face was tanned; his gray eyes were hard and steady; his jaw firm. When he moved, it was with a lithe, springing step. His endurance, strengthened by months of hard work, regular hours and simple fare, was amazing. He alone of all the men on board could climb a rope hand over hand, from the deck clear up to the topgallant yard. And he alone of all the crew of the Anne Elizabeth could lift the anvil that stood behind the mainmast by its horn and set it on the carpenter's bench.

For a half minute they faced each other, then Captain Talbot's eyes shifted. His menacing attitude changed. He looked around him nervously, licked his lips; then, muttering, "We'll see about this, we'll see about this," he turned and went below.

BUT Wesley, watchful and wary for the rest of the day, saw nothing untoward. He knew, however, that Captain Talbot was not the man to back water on board the ship he

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was master of. With as much power as any despot who ever lived, the captain was the supreme ruler once the ship had left the land. This affront to his authority would be reckoned with, but how or where Wesley could not foresee.

Day after day passed, and the ship worked to the northward. Wesley, at every opportunity, got an observation through the portholes, and checked her progress. With free sheets, she sailed bravely before the southeast trades until, two weeks after his argument with Captain Talbot, Wesley shot the sun and found they were on the line.

Even without this knowledge, there was evidence enough that the bark was near the equator. The blazing sun poured down from a brassy sky. Often, for days, the Anne Elizabeth would be becalmed, her bowsprit slowly revolving around to all the points in the compass, the sails hanging limp, the pitch boiling out of the deck seams in the heat.

Once whales were sighted, but the boats' crews had nothing but a wearying pull for their efforts, for there was no breeze, and the whales heard the sound of oars, and scattered long before there was any chance to plant an iron.

The men wore scant attire; an old pair of trousers was all the clothing necessary or wanted now. Some merely dressed in a breech clout like savages. The sun turned their tan to brown, and under its fierce glare every man aboard took on the color of old mahogany.

Gradually, as time passed, Wesley relaxed his vigilance. The ship was now headed to the eastward, and Cortez Allen voiced his opinion that they were making for the Galapagos. Two days later they raised the islands. The Anne Elizabeth stood off and on a few miles from shore. The word went around that they were going ashore for terrapin. Wesley had heard tales of the giant tortoises that were found on these islands. They were considered quite a delicacy, and he hoped that he would have a chance to go with the hunting party.

At mid afternoon Mr. Silva called his boat's crew. They rowed ashore, landed through the surf on a pebble beach. The mate ordered them all to scatter and hunt for turtles. Wesley followed a little trail that led over the sharp volcanic rocks, and after an hour's walk, a movement ahead in the brittle bushes attracted his attenion.

He ran up to the place, and caught his first sight of one of the giant land tortoises. The creature was as big as a washtub, and he had to exert all his strength to turn it over on its back.

He hurried down toward where the boat had been landed to get help to bring in his prize. When he got down to the little beach, around a jutting promontory of rocks that cut out the sight of the sea in front, he gasped in astonishment. The boat was gone!

CHAPTER VIII.

A DESPERATE CHANCE.

WESLEY ran to the edge of the beach, shaded his eyes from the glare of the sun that hung low in the west, looked for the boat. He saw it halfway between the shore and the ship. He raised his voice in a loud shout that echoed and reëchoed in the silence of the place. There was no sign that he had been heard. The regular beat of the oars glistened in the sunlight as they dipped and recovered.

He sat down on a lump of rock,

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watched the boat come up alongside the ship, saw it hoisted up in the davits. He saw the yardarms cant around, the sails one after another drop from their buntlines, tauten in the light breeze that was blowing, and the Anne Elizabeth slowly get under way. He had been tricked.

Impotently, helplessly, he saw the ship slowly gliding to the westward. What a fool he had been to get so far away from the boat! He knew now that the whole thing was but a well-laid scheme to get rid of him. Perhaps, from the very start, this had been contemplated and planned. Of all the places on the earth, this was the place where there was but one chance in a thousand of a marooned man ever getting off again. Save for the terrapin, there was nothing here to bring vessels to these barren, sun-drenched rocks. Not only that—most ships gave the Galapagos a wide berth. They lay right on the equator, in a region of calms and light winds where the tidal currents swept heavily back and forth. A becalmed ship was in a dangerous situation, for these volcanic islets which formed the group rose steeply out of the sea. A ship might be on the rocks, and be beaten to pieces by the heavy ground swell, before her anchor, hanging to the end of five hundred fathom of chain, would reach the bottom.

A sickening, dull sense of defeat and disappointment overpowered Wesley. Never again to see New Bedford, never again to see Prudence. To eke out a miserable existence on this barren, volcanic pile, to live on this ash heap for a month, two months, with the seals and the sea birds for company, and then to die alone under a blazing tropic sun. A year, five years, maybe longer, and some ship's crew would perhaps gaze on his bleached bones and wonder who they had belonged to.

But hope dies hard. Somewhere to the south'ard on one of this group of islands there was a miserable little settlement. Somewhere to the south'ard there were human beings, a chance for existence. But how to get there. This small island was but one of at least a dozen.

There were long stretches of water between them, water alive with sharks, boiling with swift tidal currents. There was no wood of which a man could build a raft, or any sort of a craft in which to make the journey.

Wesley felt in his pockets. He had a small ball of marline that he had been using the day before and his sheath knife — those and his bare hands. What use were they? He looked out to sea. The ship was almost becalmed now. The wind was dying. Perhaps this was just an accident. Perhaps they would send a boat for him. But he knew there was no use trying to bolster up his courage with those thoughts. This thing was deliberate and planned.

This afternoon, when they had come ashore, it was for the sole purpose of marooning him. He knew that they could easily account, if accounting were needed, for his absence. William Williams would go down in the log as having deserted the ship. That was all there would be to it.

THE more he thought of it, the more the certainty grew on him. Amos Tumbrill and Abner Miller, months ago back home, had thought out this scheme. They had picked this very place as the one to hold his bones. Captain Talbot was but a willing tool to carry out their wishes.

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They'd taken a sure way of silencing him, for the captain was now as guilty as they. He would cover up all evidence. Wesley Watson could tell his tale of trickery and deception to the screaming sea birds; he could shout his futile curses at the heaving ocean, for there would be no one else to listen.

Sitting on the rock, Wesley looked out across the calm water to where the Anne Elizabeth stood etched against the blue of the ocean, her sails hanging idle, rising and falling slowly. The afternoon dragged past. Toward night, Wesley noticed with a reviving of his flagging hopes that the ship seemed to be nearer the land now. Perhaps a current was setting it in. There might be a chance. He was a good swimmer. Under cover of the darkness he might be able to stroke his slow way out to her and get aboard.

With the suddenness of the tropics, the sun went down. Darkness descended, and the velvet sky was studded with stars. Off to the westward a little yellow glow rose and fell as though that light on the Anne Elizabeth had been put there to tempt him. An hour passed. It seemed to Wesley that the light was moving nearer. It was not over two miles away, he judged, although he knew that distances were very deceptive. It was a desperate chance at any rate, but he resolved that he would rather have a quick death by drowning than a slow, pitiful tapering off of his existence on this desolate isle.

Unmindful of the phosphorescent streaks where sharks cut the water outside the first line of breakers, Wesley pulled off his shoes, walked out breast deep, dived under a crashing comber and started to swim out to where that tantalizing yellow blob of light lured him forward. Slowly, to conserve his strength, he stroked along through the warm water, heaving up and down on the swell, occasionally raising his head, looking toward that beckoning glow that seemed so far away.

For the first half hour he swam with a tingling chill running up and down his spine, expecting each minute to feel the sharp teeth of a shark slicing his flesh. But as time passed, that fear left him. The light was closer now. He was drawing nearer to it with each stroke, when a new fear came over him.

The water that had been as smooth as glass, heaving slowly up and down in an oily swell, began to ripple about his face. The night breeze was starting. He became frantic. Once the breeze sprang up, the ship would get way on her, and leave.

He could see the black bulk of her outlined in the starlight ahead of him. He was so close he could hear the rattle of blocks, the dull *plop!* of canvas as her jibs filled. He stifled his impulse to cry out. If they intended to leave him, that would do no good. He would not give them the satisfaction of hearing his last despairing wail.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.

"EVERY issue is an all-star issue," an ARGOSY reader recently wrote us; "how do you do it for ten cents?" The answer is—such a big circulation that we can give you a dollar's worth for a dime, and keep our high standards of quality and variety.

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The old man tried to scream in terror

Iron Hell

Young Tommy Hodges did not flinch from the leering red-hot eyes of the iron mill furnaces; for he had a far greater hell within

By EDMUND M. LITTELL

HELL? There's no place this side of the other world more like it than the fire-broken gloom that drips constantly down from the brooding, soot-coated roof of Great Lakes Iron.

Devils? No man born of woman looks any more nearly the cloven-hoofed minion of Satan than the bare-torsoed giants, dripping with sweat, who work in the light of those fires.

Young Tommy Hodges proved it; Andy McCord, the grizzled old man who superintends the place, will tell you so with a chuckle. A great lad, Tommy; he gave the men something to think about besides the drudgery of the job. Though when he came in that day Andy didn't suspect that he ever would.

"It's hell, workin' here," Andy had said, with a wave of the hand which meant, "There it is; take it or leave it."

The youngster, looking around, had snorted:

"Hell? Ha!" with a curl of his young lips. "Put me to work!"

Andy McCord was delighted. It was the first time in more than a year that the sight of his place and his men had done anything but send a would-

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be employee hustling back to the gate. "They don't come here lookin' for work," was the way Andy scathed them all. "No; what the soft-handed, butter-spined bums want is seven pay days a week and pads for the seats o' their pants!"

Andy was so pleased with this kid that without another word he led him across the floor to one of the dozen furnaces.

"Puddin'," he said, "here's a helper for you."

Then he walked away. In the shadow of a grimy black roof column he stopped and scratched his gray head. By all the fires of the place he ruled, he didn't know the lad's name! A fine superintendent, he! And him fifty-five years old, forty of them in iron!

Just how had it happened? he wondered. What was it that had swept the lad in to him and on to a furnace like that? "Hell? Ha!" he had said—then Andy remembered his eyes. Glass-hard, they had been. Glittering brown balls sunk deep in a dead-white face. With a pair of lips drawing a grim, straight line below them, with nostrils pinched and white. He had come into the shop— How had he got in? The gates were locked and there were two signs outside: "No Help Wanted," and "No Admittance," so he must have come over the fence. He had come like a man to a battle, striding as stiff as a poker.

"Put me to work," he had said—a command, not a plea for a job.

Andy had hoped at the time that this one would prove to be the right kind of a man, for he had thought of Puddin' Evans. Puddin' was fat; in spite of the fact that he sweat rivers all day long he weighed close to three hundred pounds. Normally it was fairly good-natured tonnage, but this morning he had been different. His furnace had been cold when he arrived. His helper, who was also his son, had failed to show up before him.

"Damn that boy o' mine!" Such had been his greeting. "Damn him for a worthless, no-account bum! He's been workin' here two years now. He knows he's due here early to get the fire goin'. But what does he do last night? He goes out and gets himself beat up! When I got up this mornin' he was still in bed. His nose is smashed, one of his teeth is gone, he's got a black eye besides. And when I ask him why he ain't over here he says he's done with puddlin'. Done! When me, and my father, and his father too, all ha' been puddlers before him!"

PUDDIN' EVANS had to have a helper. Andy had already sent him two men, only to have him order them away.

"Oh, get out o' here!" he had bellowed at each in turn. "You ain't worth the powder to blow you up!" Because he was angered at his son John, of course, not for any other reason.

Then the youngster had come in, and his defiant spirit had swept him on to Puddin's furnace, for Andy's knowledge of men worked almost automatically. If Puddin' wasn't willing to accept the help of men who were smilingly ready, Andy reasoned, maybe the stiff-backed attitude of the youngster would satisfy him.

It didn't look as if it would, though. Andy thought as much as he stood behind the post and watched. Puddin' glowered at the lad, the lad stared back at Puddin'.

"Well," Puddin' growled at last, "are you goin' to work with your coat on, or are you goin' to work?"

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Not a word from the youngster. Only a silent baring of teeth in a grimace that had no humor in it. Off came his coat. So did the shirt beneath it.

"Underwear!" Puddin' jeered then. "He's wearin' underwear!" So he was. And it was tight upon the swell of husky-looking shoulders too, Andy was quick to observe. But the lad had no answer for that remark either. He only stood there at attention until Puddin' lifted his shoulders in a resigned shrug.

"All right," he growled. "Get over there and see what you can do with a fire."

He pointed, and the lad strode to the fire box end of the furnace. He opened the door, his eyes narrowing in the blast of light that leaped out. He found the shovel and with it turned to the coal pile where he scooped up a heavy load.

"No, no, no!" Puddin' bellowed. The forward swing of the shovel stopped just in time. "Rake it down first, you half-wit! How the devil can you hot it up if you don't break it first?"

Teeth showed briefly in another silent grimace. *Clang!* the shovel sounded on the hard-packed floor of earth. Up came the poker. His face screwed into a tight knot as he lanced the coals and the heat stabbed back at him. But he broke it up thoroughly—and viciously, Andy thought. Then he took up the shovel again. The coal sailed in. The door clanged shut. And Puddin's big belly jumped in what Andy suspected might be a grudging grunt of approval.

Here was a time when Andy might have gone forward and asked the lad his name, for Puddin' had begun to rabble his heat. Standing in front of the belly-high hole in the working door of his furnace, he was stirring it up like a fury. Sweat broke out all over him. Every square inch of his bare fat torso was a wet mirror reflecting the light from inside. His pants, which began somewhere amid a fold in his waist and sagged from there to the ground, were turning to sodden rags. He was busy. He had forgotten his absent son. He didn't even know he had a helper.

But Andy didn't go forward. He stayed where he was and watched. For the youngster, instead of retreating from the heat as every old-timer did when he had a chance, had moved up close beside Puddin'. The grimness of lip was still there; so was the glassy eye. But in his demeanor was a determined alertness. He watched every move Puddin' made. He peered into the hole to see what the rabble was doing. He even spotted the smoke that began to puff out from beneath Puddin's hand rag.

IT'S a vital necessity, that hand rag. Worn between the palm and the shank of the rabble on the hand nearest the furnace, it protects the palm from a heat that soon begins to crawl up from the stirring end of the rabble. It gets pretty hot in time.

Even a puddler's calloused paw couldn't stand the heat that eventually creeps up there, for the lower end of the rabble gradually gets almost as hot as the boil it stirs. It would melt off completely, in fact, if left there long enough. But it never is. Soon after the hand rag begins to smoke, it is exchanged for another.

This is what Puddin' started to do. He pulled out the rabble, dripping iron and so hot that it began to bend slowly of its own red weight. But he didn't

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have to stoop and pick up the other one. The lad had looked around quickly, found it lying in the shadow at the base of the furnace, and was holding it out to him.

"Doggone!" Andy swore softly. That was intelligence, whatever the mood that lurked behind the stony face. It was the sort of intelligence that any craftsman appreciates in a helper.

Puddin' got it too. It showed in the swift glance he lifted to the lad as he grabbed the rabble. But he didn't say anything. There wasn't any time. This was the culminating moment in the cycle of iron. He had to stay in front of the hole and stir until the molten charge had "come to nature" —turned into a solid, spongy mass; then he had to divide it into three balls.

That done, he merely turned to the lad and growled, "Go watch your fire!" after which he dropped the rabble and took up a pair of tongs.

For it is an unceasing process, the puddling of iron. It goes on and on and on in cycles that are completed in less than two hours, then start all over again. Sometimes a puddler and his helper work together all day long without the exchange of so much as a word. Sometimes, as with Puddin' and his son John, orders had to be bellowed quite frequently. In this case—

A two-wheeled "buggy"—looking like a huge, flat wheelbarrow—had been pushed up by two men. On its iron platform lay a pair of tongs with six-foot handles. Puddin' picked them up and raised the working door. He thrust the tongs into the incandescence and dragged out a red-hot, spongy ball of slag and iron mixed that weighed two hundred pounds, and with a heave and a roll swung it onto the buggy as though it weighed less than fifty.

Two other balls followed, all three destined for the squeezer, which would roll them as if between the palms of two hands until the slag came out like juice from a lemon. Then he stepped back. His job was finished.

OLD ANDY still looked on. The time had come for Puddin' to take a rest. While six hundred pounds of pig iron were being charged, and while his helper spent thirty minutes slogging at the fire, he was due to go for a bucket of beer.

Before he went he gave Andy the sign of approval for which the old super had been watching. He looked about, wiping the sweat from his face and eyes, then raised his voice in a bellow:

"Hey, you!"

The lad had just closed the fire-box door. In the gloom that had descended upon that end of the furnace he was wiping the sweat from his brow. He heard the call and answered it—quickly, Andy noted. He was wet with sweat and dirty by now. His face and his once white undershirt were coated with dust and ashes. But he was ready, silently so. His attitude bespoke it.

"Where's your gloves?" Puddin' demanded.

"I haven't got any," said the lad curtly. It was his first speech to Puddin'.

Puddin' scowled. "Go get a pair," he ordered. "You ain't goin' to have no time to nurse blisters if you work for me. And when you get back, quit playin' with the fire. Give it the devil."

That was all. He turned on his heel and strode away to the bucket of beer in the corner. But it was enough for Andy. Watching the lad march across the floor to the gate and the store beyond, he gave vent to a chuckle.

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His little stunt was working. Each of the two was a-bristle with his own kind of a temper, ready to flare up at the drop of a hat. The lad who had snorted at Andy's idea of hell was willing to work to prove he did not fear it, and Puddin', though "Damn that boy o' mine" was in everything he said, was willing to accept the help of another man's boy if he obeyed with speed and precision.

But would it last? Andy asked himself. Could the youngster stick the day?

Before the day was over he would have to "quit playin' with the fire" four times. He would have to shovel almost two tons of coal, to say nothing of the ashes. Four times would he have to wheel up barrow-loads of roll scale for thickening the stuff his fire melted. Four times would he have to wheel away the slag that overflowed out of the slag hole when the roll scale was added. And if he should let down the tiniest bit—

TWELVE furnaces Andy McCord had to watch, and though puddlers were men who took pride in their craft, and got out their five heats of iron a day without compulsion, Andy had to see that everything else ran smoothly.

The ball buggies had to be on the spot the moment they were needed. The squeezer had to be kept going right or the steady tide of balls would pile up and get cold.

The muck rollers, men who took the squeezed-down balls and rolled them in the bar mill, had to be kept on their toes. There were a thousand things to watch in that never idle place, without any let-up. Noonday shut-downs were unknown there, the men eating their lunches at the irregular hours dictated by their furnaces. Yet for the rest of the day Andy somehow managed to stay pretty close to Puddin' Evans's furnace.

He was there when the fire had been stoked like fury and Puddin' ordered the lad to go and get the roll scale. He saw the youngster turn away without a word of question as to where it was or how to get it, and paid tribute to his intelligence by stopping him in the darkness and telling him what to do. He saw the same thing repeated when the slag overflowed and once more helped him out. He saw the stiff-backed, almost antagonistic coöperation keep on—and then, when the day was over, he heard an exchange of words that made him chuckle again.

For the youngster stuck it out. Whatever it was that lurked behind that defiance of his, it carried him through nine long hours of labor such as few men cared to tackle. Nor did he say another word, even when Puddin', angered because he stuck around so close, turned on him and bellowed: "Oh, go sit down! How can I do any work when you're under my feet all the time?"

He was tired out. His dark-brown eyes were dull. There were drawn lines about his mouth, hollows in his cheeks. His shoulders sagged. His heels scuffed on the ground as he walked—sure sign of fatigue. And Puddin', noticing this, let out a growled remark.

"Huh!" he grunted. "I s'pose this is the last time we'll see *you* around here!"

It was a compliment of a sort; Andy knew it. While Puddin' was still in an ugly mood because of his son John's desertion, he knew in the bottom of his heart that this lad was a good helper and wanted him to come back. But

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the youngster didn't take it as a compliment. Instantly he stiffened.

"Oh, think so?" he said, and the hard light flashed in his eyes again. "Well, take another guess!"

"I ain't heard you askin' any questions about when you're due here in the mornin'," was Puddin's answer to that.

"I don't ask questions," the lad retorted. "Come around at seven to-morrow and see whether your furnace is hot."

He turned his back. His heels no longer scuffing, he stalked to the curb. He stepped in front of a decrepit old flivver roadster, cranked it and climbed in. Then, his eyes still hard and staring straight ahead, he drove off down the street.

Here was where Andy chuckled, though he didn't do it aloud. For Puddin', not used to being talked back to like that, was completely cowed.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he growled, looking after the vanishing car. "Of all the— Say, did you tell that kid when to show up?"

"No, I didn't," said Andy.

"Then how the deuce does he— What's his name?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know! You hired him, didn't you?"

"No. He came in and took a job away from me."

"He did, did he?"

"I figured," Andy went on, "you bein' his boss, you'd do any askin' that was necessary."

But Puddin' didn't hear. He was doing some thinking. "'Don't have to ask questions,' eh?" he growled. "'Come around at seven and find out,' huh! All right, bucko me lad. If I don't uncover the nigger in your woodpile my name ain't Puddin' Evans." And then, hitching his pants up over his huge belly, he strode away toward home.

FIVE minutes before seven the next morning Puddin' came in. Andy noticed it with a chuckle, and failed to observe that he, too, had come a little early. The puddler found his furnace hot and the first charge of pig iron ready to go in. The lad, this time minus his underwear and already dripping with sweat, was standing beside the open working door.

"Say," was Puddin's greeting, "what's your name?"

The lad looked around, and the glass-hard look came into his eyes again.

He hesitated a moment. Then he answered in a voice that rasped a bit:

"Hodges."

"Hodges?" Puddin' growled. "I know a man named Hodges. Him and me used to work together in Pittsburgh. Is your father's name Bob Hodges?"

Slowly the lad's tension eased, as though he was relieved at not being recognized.

"No," he said, "my father's name isn't Bob Hodges."

"He's a puddler, though," Puddin' insisted. "Ain't he?"

"No."

"Then how the Sam Hill do you know so much about this job?" Puddin' rumbled.

This time the lad took a deep breath. His eyes, once more as hard as glass, looked squarely into Puddin's.

"I worked here all day yesterday, didn't I?" he said.

"Yes, almost," said Puddin'.

"I worked hard enough to suit you?"

"Yes, you did," Puddin' admitted.

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Then he drew himself up. "All right," he said. "I'll do it again to-day. I'll do it to-morrow, too. I'll keep on doing it as long as you want me to. If I happened to pick up a little information about this place from a blabbermouth that bragged about how good he was, that's my business. And if you want to know it, my father's name is Tom Hodges, not Bob. I was named after him. He was born right here in Chicago and he's never been out of town. He is not a puddler. He don't know the first thing about puddling. He runs a grocery store, or used to. Now he's a—drunkard."

Cold and hard, that speech. Standing there with his hands clenched at his sides, he had delivered it as though he dared Puddin' to deny it. He hesitated on the last word, though. His voice dropped. And then, before either Puddin' or Andy could say anything, he turned on his heel and almost ran to the fire box. As for Puddin'—

The last of the pig iron had been charged. The men who did it had lowered the working door and gone away. But there was plenty of light. It poured out of the hole in the door and showed Puddin' standing there, staring.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he growled. Turning to Andy, he added: "I know all about that Hodges. He owns the grocery on the corner near us, and a damn' fine man he is—or was. Say, it must be heck, havin' a drunkard for a father!"

Puddin' might growl and snarl at times because of his son John, but his heart was big. Though he himself drank beer as if it were water—there wasn't a puddler there who didn't have his bucket of beer after each heat—he disliked the thought of a man who couldn't let hard liquor alone.

"Hey, son!" he called, and strode back into the light that was pouring out of the fire box.

YOUNG HODGES was busy. He had opened the fire box door and was breaking up the fire. Viciously, Andy noted. But he stopped and looked at Puddin'.

"I'm sorry, son," Puddin' growled. "Maybe I said the wrong thing. I was only tryin' to find out about you."

At first the boy couldn't believe what he heard. He stared at Puddin' with a suspicious hardness in his eyes. Then the hardness went out of them.

"Aw, that's all right," he said huskily. "I—I'm sorry I talked the way I did, too. I guess I've been kinda out of my head lately."

Precisely! Andy thought. That "Hell? Ha!" of his had meant only one thing: "What do you know about hell?" the words had implied. "This is nothing to what mine is." And his glassy eyes and drawn, white face were explained.

"I—my father isn't such an awful drunkard," the lad went on. "He just drinks a little too much sometimes. The other night I— Well, I couldn't stand it any longer, I guess. He had promised not to do it any more, but I found him hanging onto a lamp post. I got pretty mad, I guess. I got him home, somehow, and when I dumped him on the bed and he looked up at me and grinned and said I was a nice boy—well, I got so mad I told him he could go to hell—"

Abruptly his voice stopped. All at once, it seemed, he had become fully aware of his surroundings. Up to that moment he hadn't really looked at the place; now he took it in with eyes that saw the whole picture. He stood there in silence for a good long minute, then he looked at Puddin'.

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"Say," he almost whispered; "this is hell, isn't it?"

Why, so it was! The thought flashed into Andy's mind like an explosion. There was probably no other place on earth that so closely resembled hell. And he had been working in it all his life without ever thinking of that. He had greeted each would-be employee with a wave of his hand and the statement: "It's hell, workin' here," simply to test the man, not because he had ever thought it was such a place. But now he was being made aware of it by a lad who had been only a day on the job.

"Funny, ain't it?" he observed to Puddin' afterward. "It takes a stranger to show you something you've been seein' all your life."

And Puddin', chuckling in that bubbly way of his, said:

"Damned if it ain't, Andy!"

At the moment each of them was looking at the place with the eyes of a newcomer. It was Tommy who broke the silence.

"Say!" he began with a sudden excitement in his eyes. "Suppose my father woke up some day and found himself in here! Suppose I picked him up and brought him here—"

He didn't finish the sentence, but Puddin' got his meaning instantly. So did Andy. But before Andy could say how he felt about the idea, Puddin' had let out a great bellow of laughter, clapped the boy on the shoulder, and shouted:

"Go to it, kid! Bring your old man in here and we'll put on such a hell for him that he'll never take another drink as long as he lives!"

It was here that the lad hesitated again. He looked at Puddin' as though he had something else to say; he even opened his mouth. Then another thought stopped him. Not until after he had brought his father in did Andy know what it was.

FOR he did bring his father, and the men put on a show such as never had been acted in any puddling mill in the country. Days went by before young Tommy could find his father in the proper condition, however, and with each day Andy registered a protest that was more and more violent. He swore the experiment should not be tried. Puddin' put a stop to him at last, a Puddin' who was treating the boy like a son.

"Listen here, Andy McCord," he rumbled one day. "Maybe you don't know it, not havin' any kids, but that boy loves his father. And that ain't all; his old man loves him, even when he's drunk. Why, my old woman used to talk to me about Tom Hodges till I was ready to kill him. She used to tell me how Tom and Tommy were always together. They was like brothers, she said, not like father and son, and she wanted me to be the same way with John. She was right, too, but I didn't know it. If I'd treated John halfway decent . . .

"Well, Tom used to be a good man. He moved into our neighborhood with a wife and a baby and nothing else but the suit o' clothes he had on his back, and before he got through he had the nicest grocery in the neighborhood and a house and lot all paid for.

"That was his trouble, though: he got through. He began drinkin' for pleasure, not because he was thirsty. And about that time Tommy grew up and began to take notice. Oh, I can guess how the kid must ha' felt. Remember the time when you thought your dad was the finest man in the world, and how you woke up and

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found out that there was a hell of a lot of 'em that was better? Well, that is the way Tommy feels; and if I can help him turn his dad back into a decent citizen again, I'm goin' to do it."

After that Andy said not a word. He let Puddin' make what plans he could, and watched Puddin' show a leniency toward his new helper such as he had never shown toward his son.

Tommy went out every noon, sometimes to return much later than he should have. But Puddin' never complained. If Tommy was late, he took over the charging of the pig iron and the stoking of the fire himself.

One day Tommy came in with a load flung across his shoulder. He staggered a bit as he walked across the sunlit yard outside, for the dead weight he carried was greater than his own. He came into the shadowy place, went to the center of the floor, and lowered the sodden figure to the ground at the foot of a roof column. There was anguish in his eyes when he straightened up, but his voice was clear.

"I found him in a doorway," he said.

Puddin' cursed softly; so did Andy. Some of the other men who were gathered around muttered among themselves. A fine sort of a man to father such a boy!

"I've got some ammonia," Tommy said. "As soon as you're ready, I'll give him a whiff and bring him to."

They were ready. Every man had been rehearsed in his part. As for the setting, it was there always.

FIRES, a dozen of them, all blazing in the gloom. Incandescent furnaces, twelve of them; some with doors open to pour out floods of light, some with doors closed and the working hole blinking like an evil eye; some with holes partly obscured by the sweating bodies of the men who rabbled the iron inside.

White-hot balls were being trundled on buggies across the floor to the squeezer. That big machine was champing away on the brilliant masses of sponge like a mastodon drooling at the mouth. Slag dripped down from its slavering jaws—red-hot slag threw up sparks as it struck the ground.

When each big ball was squeezed down, men appeared out of the darkness and whisked the mass away to the bar mills near by. There snakes crawled back and forth between shining rolls, glistening serpents that grew longer and thinner as their heads darted forward and back.

Bare-torsoed men were darting hither and yon, their sweaty bodies reflecting the lights of the fires; thick dark gloom dripped down from the roof; the roar of air blasts resounded. To any man it was a perfect picture of hell; what must it have been to the eyes of one who started up out of a drunken stupor?

His eyes stared; they almost bulged out of his head. He saw Puddin'; selected because of his mighty voice and his enormous proportions, standing directly in front of him. In his hand was a red-hot rabbling bar, its lower end clotted with a lump of iron and dripping slag.

"What's your name?" Puddin' bellowed, his voice the voice of doom.

"H-Hodges," Tommy's father stammered, "wh-where am I?"

"You're in hell!" roared Puddin', "You're Tom Hodges?"

"Y-yes. Oh, my God!"

"Tom Hodges, we've been lookin' for you!" Puddin' bawled at him. "Three times we've sent for you. And

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now—we've got you!" He flourished his rabbling bar.

"Oh, God!" Tommy's father cried.

"Who are you to call on your God?" Puddin' roared. "You've thought of Him too late. What have you done to your boy? Your wife?"

Hodges moaned.

"Too late! To-o-o late!" Puddin' waved his hand.

His rabbling bar swept close in front of the wildly staring eyes. Other bars leaped forward too. Bare-torsoed men, their wet skins reflecting the light from the fires, let out a mighty yell. The orange-hot lumps of iron on the ends of the bars crept closer—and Tom Hodges cowered down.

"What's the sentence?" roared Puddin'.

"*Roast him!*" bellowed the others.

Up came a pair of six-foot tongs. They were hot on the ends of their outspread jaws. Puddin' took them in his great hands and opened them wider. Tom Hodges screamed. Terrible, the sound. But the widened jaws moved closer to him. They almost seared the hands he thrust out to ward them off—

With a blood-curdling yell Tom Hodges leaped to his feet, smashed his way through the circle of men, and fled.

INSTANT confusion followed. The carefully rehearsed show turned into a rout. Three of the men went down under Hodges's unexpected charge. The others, turning to give chase, tripped over these and went down. Red-hot rabbling bars, sweating flesh, threshing feet and legs—all were tangled on the floor. More than one man was to find himself painfully burned.

Straight ahead down the line of furnaces two men were pushing a ball buggy—that ponderous two-wheeled affair like a metal wheelbarrow, loaded with three of those two hundred pound lumps of white-hot iron. Screaming, Hodges charged headlong through his tormentors and down the long barn. Driven by panic. He crashed into the men pushing the ball buggy. Down they went like tenpins. Hodges fell, knocking them aside.

Down dropped the heavy shafts of the buggy. One of them caught Hodges squarely on the stomach, and pinned him to the ground. The three great lumps of incandescent iron added their weight to the pressure of the buggy shaft.

Then, to the intense horror of the men, those three glowing, flattened balls began to slide down the tilted buggy toward the helpless victim. Slowly, jerkily they started down the sleek metal platform, worn to a polish by many loadings.

All had happened in a moment. The two men who had been pushing the buggy rolled to safety. The others struggled madly to break free. They yelled. They fought each other.

Puddin' Evans was still on his feet. His great voice bellowing, he was wading through the tangle of struggling men like an elephant through a brush heap. Andy was racing forward, too. Dashing around the threshing mob and cursing as he ran, Andy was moving faster than he ever had in all his life. But both would be too late; even as he ran he knew it.

Then he saw young Tommy. Eyes ablaze, white teeth showing, he was leaping over the pile of men as a lumberjack crosses a log jam. Almost sailing through the air, he passed Puddin'. Two enormous jumps, and he was stooping over his father.

As the first of the three balls slipped

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to the edge of the platform and caused the clothes of both of them to burst into smoking spots, he seized the shafts. Then, with a strength made almost superhuman by the emergency, he arched his back and hoisted. The platform slowly rose to level, and then tilted the other way. As he stood there holding the shafts up high, his father tremblingly clawed himself into a standing position, using Tommy as a support.

"YES, sir, this is hell." So Andy always ends his account of the affair. And as he says it he waves his hand at the gloomy place he still rules. "There ain't many of 'em left any more. Steel's been puttin' the iron business on the shelf the last few years, but there's a few shops left and there ain't a one of 'em that don't know about the show we put on—and what came afterward. And none of us ever tried to pull another one, either. I decided right then that we'd stay in the iron business, not in the soul-savin' business.

"It don't work, this tryin' to scare a man into doin' something he oughtn't to do. It didn't work with Tom Hodges, why should it work with any one else?

"Oh, he's straightened out a lot, but it wasn't because o' the hell we pulled. It was what came after. He stood there lookin' at his boy for what seemed to me a couple of hours. He was shakin' like a leaf. He was stone sober, too. Puddin' and me, we shoved the buggy out o' the way and some o' the boys got the balls on over to the squeezer, but him and Tommy didn't know what was goin' on. Then he swallowed a couple o' times and tried to do some talkin'.

"'Tommy,' he says, 'Tommy,' and then he stopped and swallowed some more. And Tommy put his arms around him and said 'Dad!'

"After that neither one of 'em said anythin' for a while. Then old Tom got hold of his tongue.

"'Tommy,' he said, 'I guess I haven't been much of a father, have I? But maybe I can change. Maybe, if you'll give me another chance—'

"Another chance? Tommy gave it to him, o' course. The old man's retired now, livin' on what he made out o' the grocery. Oh, he fell off the wagon a couple o' times, but afterwards he sort o' slipped in here and stood lookin' on, not sayin' a word. Watchin' Tommy.

"Sure, Tommy Hodges is still on the job. Him and Puddin' worked together till Puddin' decided to retire. Now Tommy's runnin' a furnace of his own.

"Another funny thing. We didn't know it till afterwards. John—Puddin's boy, you know—was the one that got Tommy started into the place. He'd been plaguin' Tommy for years, talkin' about how he was a puddler and nobody could lick him. Well, he saw Tommy takin' his father home that night, and he laughed. That made Tommy mad. He leaned his father up against a fence and went back and beat John to within an inch of his life. Then he took his father home, and showed up at the shop in the mornin'.

"'He's a great lad,' Puddin' said when he found out about the lickin'. And so he is. When the boys are feelin' a little bit off their feed, all I got to do is let out a yell. 'Are we devils?' And every one of 'em turns around and looks at Tommy an' me, lets out a whoop an' yells right back, 'Hell, yes!'"

THE END.

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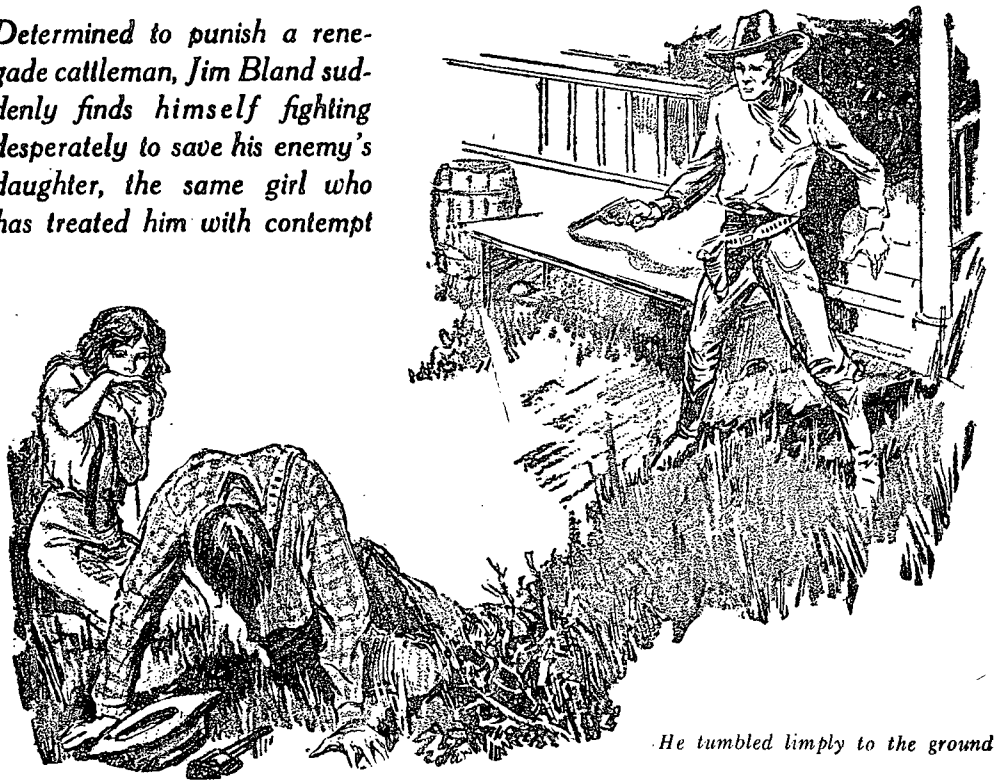
Double Cross Ranch

Determined to punish a renegade cattleman, Jim Bland suddenly finds himself fighting desperately to save his enemy's daughter, the same girl who has treated him with contempt



He tumbled limply to the ground

By CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

Author of "Man-Hunt," "Gone North," etc.

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

IT was to obtain justice for his friend Farnsworth that Jim Bland Templeton had come up from his larger ranch in another part of Arizona to his Cross-in-a-Box ranch, adjoining Double Cross ranch, owned by the unscrupulous Wetherell, but Jim soon found himself in a perplexing situation. Wetherell, in the East, had stolen from the estate of Mary Addison before Farnsworth married her.

With the aid of the Cross-in-a-Box foreman, Teasdale, a trap is laid for Wetherell, who is caught in the act of rustling stock. His life is saved by the man who calls himself Jim Bland, and Bland is hired as Wetherell's foreman, with the understanding that he will assist in rustling. It was Wetherell's daughter Della who caused Bland to free Wetherell from the trap, and she, being honest, despises Bland, thinking him a real rustler. Mrs. Wetherell, too, is shocked by the news that her husband has been caught stealing cattle.

Bland encounters Punditt, Double

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Cross straw boss, branding cows stolen from the Cross-in-a-Box outfit, tells him to go ahead with his dishonest work, and learns that the cattle are to be sold at a near-by town. Punditt shows that he is a dangerous man. Bland also learns that Teasdale has two spies in the Double Cross outfit—Jeff Lefingwell, a Georgian, and Shorty Quillan. Lefingwell saves Bland's life when one of Punditt's underlings is about to shoot him.

Wetherell is again apprehended by Teasdale in the act of branding Cross-in-a-Box heifers, and his life is spared only when he pays Teasdale ten thousand dollars and signs a note for an additional fifteen thousand dollars to pay for the heifers. As this means twenty thousand dollars profit to the Cross-in-a-Box outfit, Bland sends that amount to Farnsworth, telling him that Wetherell has decided to start making restitution.

Three villainous-looking horsemen swoop down on the Wetherell ranch, to find Mrs. Wetherell and Della there, apparently alone. They start to carry Della off, claiming that Wetherell has robbed them of stock. Bland suddenly appears.

CHAPTER XIV.

DESPERATE SHOOTING.

BLAND'S body was in a crouch. Della could see that all his muscles were tensed in that peculiar strained fashion that immediately precedes action, violent and deadly. She was close enough to him to see his eyes, and she perceived that the serenity that she had mentally noted was no longer there. They were steady, as always, but now they were filled with some terrific passion, and there were strange flecks of light in them that appeared to coalesce around the pupils.

His lips were in straight, white lines. His chin had come forward a little, and she could see the cords of his neck swelling and straining. Yet though she knew that the man's whole body was held in the grip of the mighty passion that had seized him, it was evident that his brain was clear, his thoughts definite, his intention plain. He meant to kill the outlaw leader.

He had not drawn his gun. Della could see its stock in the holster.

She could see that his right arm was hanging stiffly downward, the fingers spreading a little apart. She had never witnessed the spectacle of a cowboy drawing a gun, but in the stress of this moment she realized how much depended upon the rapidity of the motion.

Not more than twenty-five or thirty feet of space separated Bland from the outlaw leader, and Della knew that this was not to be a question of marksmanship. She felt that neither man could miss, and that the first man who got his gun working would be the victor. The advantage, naturally, was with the outlaw leader, for with her body partially covering the man's, Bland had only a half target to shoot at, while Bland himself, standing there in the open, had no protection whatever. Also, she doubted that Bland would dare to shoot. The risk of his bullet hitting her would be too great.

But in the terrible interval that elapsed between the time that she had turned to see Bland at the corner of the gallery and now, when she was witnessing the terrifying spectacle of Bland's appearance, she observed from the alert, darting gleam of Bland's eyes that he was seeking a target. She

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was certain that he intended to shoot, and though she hated him, she had confidence in him.

The outlaw leader had not drawn his gun. He had twisted around until his left side was toward Bland. His left arm was crushing Della against him.

It was now over her chest, pinning her left arm against his left shoulder, in front, the hand gripping her right arm near the shoulder. She was held there as if in a vise, facing Bland. The outlaw's right arm, which had been gripping her, had dropped. She could feel that arm and hand moving backward toward his right hip, and she knew that one of his big guns was there.

She knew that the moment had come, and for a dizzying instant she closed her eyes while the world reeled drunkenly about her. Then, urged by the conviction that she must help Bland, she bent her head to the huge arm that was thrown across her chest and bit it viciously.

THE outlaw leader cursed; the bitten arm jerked away, loosened its grip. Quickly she wrenched herself free, stumbled, lost her balance and fell. She went down on her right shoulder, her back to Bland. Wildly gazing upward, she saw the outlaw leader reach for his gun, his hand moving with amazing rapidity.

She remembered thinking that Bland must be too late to match the outlaw leader's movements, and she closed her eyes so that she might not see the flash of his gun. Then she heard Bland's gun roar. She opened her eyes again and saw the outlaw leader, gun in hand. His legs were bending at the knees, he was slumping forward and his gun was dangling helplessly in his loosened fingers. There was an expression of hideous rage and amazement in his eyes. And as she watched he tried to lift the drooping gun. Bland's weapon roared again. The outlaw leader shuddered, his muscles leaped and jerked. He stood for an awful instant erect, his eyes closed. Then he tumbled limply to the ground.

She turned now, and saw Bland standing at a little distance out from the edge of the gallery. He was leaning forward, gun in hand. He seemed to be gazing past her.

She had got to her knees and was facing him. She started to get up and she heard Bland's voice, sharp and cold.

"Lie down, lie down!" he warned.

She obeyed by quickly dropping face down, and she saw Bland, still crouching, moving slightly to the right.

Bewildered, horrified, and yet fascinated by Bland's appearance, she watched him. He was still deliberate, still master of himself in spite of the tragedy. He paid no attention to the dead outlaw leader, to Mrs. Wetherell, who was still lying unconscious upon the gallery floor, or to herself, lying on the sand near him. He was implacable, relentless, ruthless.

She had forgotten the other outlaws until now. Still watching Bland, she saw him at a little distance from her, standing motionless, peering westward toward the stables. For an instant, she thought nothing more would happen. Then she heard Bland's gun roar again, she saw the huge weapon spurt fire and smoke—twice.

Bland still stood motionless. A report, seeming to come from the direction of the stables or the other buildings, and dulled by distance, reached her ears. She heard the whine of a bullet, saw the dust and sand erupt

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near Bland, heard the bullet thud into the front wall of the house.

Bland's gun roared again, spitefully. An interval of silence during which the reports reverberated and were flung back and forth in diminishing cadences among the cliffs and the hills. Then Bland's gun roared again.

She saw him now leaning a little forward, peering toward the stables. She saw him slowly relax. He raised his six-shooter, broke it, calmly ejected the spent cartridges and reloaded the weapon. He snapped the cylinder, twirled it critically and then slowly walked toward the stables.

WHILE he went westward Della got up and ran to her mother. Mrs. Wetherell had a great blue welt on the left side of her face, where the outlaw leader's fist had landed. She had been stunned, but apparently was not seriously injured, for she was opening her eyes when Della knelt at her side.

Della helped her into one of the rocking chairs, then ran into the house, got some water and a towel and bathed her mother's face and forehead. Mrs. Wetherell asked no questions. She was trembling, but she knew of course that Della was safe, and she must have divined what had happened to the outlaw leader.

A heavy silence had now descended. The sinister atmosphere of death by violence had settled over the ranch house. It seemed to Della that this tragedy had brought a note of unreality into her life. It seemed that she must have dreamed it. Yet she knew it was real enough, for there was the body of the outlaw leader lying flat on his back in front of the gallery. There was his horse, its reins trailing, standing in the open space between the ranch house and the stables. There were the distant mountains, their peaks clearly defined against the white sky. There were the tall granite cliffs along the river, with the dark, silent forest stretching northward over the great upland. There was the vast country, serene and calm, spreading before her into the distance. And there, at the corral gate, was Jim Bland, removing the saddles and bridles from two horses.

She watched Bland, marveling at his deliberation of movement, at his calmness. She knew from his action in unsaddling and unbridling the horses and turning them into the corral that the other riders were dead. He had killed them.

White of face, her lips pressed tightly together, still dazed and bewildered by the swift and violent tragedy which she had witnessed, she dropped to the arm of her mother's chair, drew her mother's head toward her and shuddered.

After a while she saw Jim Bland coming toward the gallery. She would not have known, could not have told from his actions, that a few moments before he had acted as a ruthless agent of vengeance. He did not look at her, but seized the reins of the outlaw leader's horse, led the animal to the corral, removed saddle and bridle from him, and turned him into the inclosure. There on the ground at the corral gate were three saddles and three bridles. And there, for an instant, stood Jim Bland.

Bland was gazing eastward. He seemed to be interested in something or somebody in that direction. And then Della heard the thudding of hoofs and she looked up to see her father and Jeff riding around a corner of the gallery.

Both smiled at her. Then they saw

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the prone form of the outlaw leader. They were off their horses in a flash and were standing close, peering intently at the man's face. And then presently Della was telling them what had happened.

CHAPTER XV.

UNSUSPECTED HAZARDS.

HER narrative finished, Della went into the house. She and her father took Mrs. Wetherell to one of the big, airy bedrooms, where they did their best to calm and comfort her, for she was suffering from the reaction of her experience and had become almost hysterical.

Bland and Jeff remained outside. They had heard Mrs. Wetherell crying and they had moved away from the ranch house. They were now leaning against the corral fence. Both were smoking. Of the two, Bland appeared less affected by the tragedy. His hand was steady, his eyes were again serene, though they had still a strange glint in them, as if memory still held a picture of the grim scene that had been enacted.

Jeff was visibly stirred. His face was flushed, his eyes were gleaming with admiration as he watched Bland. A few minutes before joining Bland at the fence he had spent some time at the side of the dead outlaw leader. He had inspected the man from every angle, with growing interest and amazement, and at last he had muttered aloud to himself: "Well, I'll be damned!"

And now, squinting his gleaming eyes at Bland, he said: "Bland, did you ever hear of Dave Clell, the gunfighter?"

"Sure," returned Bland.

"A hell-bender," resumed Jeff. "If you've heard of him, you must know of his reputation. There's men in this country who will tell you that he was poison with a gun. I've heard of gunfighters that have sneaked out of town when they found Dave Clell in it."

"I've heard that," admitted Bland.

"You seen him lately?" Jeff was looking at Bland intently.

"I've heard of him, Jeff, but I've never seen him."

"The devil you ain't! Why, man, you've just got through killin' him! That's Dave Clell laying over there in front of the gallery. You killed the fastest gunman in this country and didn't even know it!"

Bland blew a whiff of smoke downward.

"I always was lucky," he said. "I reckon I wouldn't have got him if it hadn't been for Della." He related how Della had bitten Clell's arm, thus momentarily distracting his attention and giving Bland that fraction of a second's advantage which is so vital a factor in a gun fight.

"She knew what was coming, it seemed," he said. "She never lost her head. When she bit Clell he let go of her, and she fell out of the line of fire. I was pulling my gun then; Clell had just started for his."

"It was an even break," declared Jeff. "You say he was holdin' Della, and that she bit him. Well, if he was holdin' her and lookin' at you, he had plenty of time to go for his gun. And you had to wait till Della got free before you could sling yours."

His eyes narrowed. "What was Clell and the other two jaspers doin' here?"

Della had not included that detail in her story.

"They were looking for that herd of

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steers that you were helping Punditt and the boys to run off."

WHILE Clell had been with Della and her mother, explaining to them the object of the visit of himself and his two riders, Bland had been stealing along the side of the ranch house toward the corner of the gallery.

He had seen the riders coming, and while they had been momentarily hidden by the stable he had darted from the foreman's shanty to the rear of the ranch house, intending to enter the rear door to warn Della and her mother. The rapid pace at which the riders had been traveling, together with their wild appearance and the fact that all of the Double Cross men were absent, had convinced him that they would bear watching. And then when he had reached the rear of the ranch house and had heard Della's voice and her mother's on the gallery and the threats of the outlaw leader, he had decided to stay outside.

"So that was it," said Jeff. "I was wonderin' where Punditt got 'em. I knowed they had some of the Cross-in-a-Box steers, but I didn't know where they'd got the others. Me and Quillan was out lookin' for strays that day, and we run into Punditt and the bunch in that high country north. I reckoned they must have got 'em quite a distance away because they was gone a couple of days. Punditt sure has got plenty of gall, rustlin' stock from the Clell gang."

They were silent now, for they saw Wetherell crossing the gallery.

Wetherell stepped down, walked to Clell and looked at him, then he came on toward the corral fence where Bland and Jeff stood.

Wetherell's face was white and drawn, but there was gratitude in his eyes as he looked at Bland.

"Bland," he said; "I want to thank you. Hiring you was the best thing I ever did in my life. If it hadn't been for you there's no telling what those scoundrels would have done!"

"Wetherell, you can steal cattle from some men and they'll come pretty near to acting the gentleman about it. Steal from other men and they'll do anything they can to square things with you," said Bland.

"You heard them, Bland?"

"Heard them and saw the steers," returned Bland. "Punditt and the Double Cross boys were getting ready to run a brand in a clearing up the creek the day I got here," he added. "They had some of Teasdale's stock. I had seen some of Teasdale's riders in the high country a couple of hours previous and I thought that maybe they were trailing the Double Cross. So I stopped the branding and sent them on to where they were going. They went north to a pass in the mountains. Jeff lamed his horse and came back alone. I reckon Jeff saw me at the clearing where Punditt was intending to brand."

Wetherell looked at Jeff.

Jeff nodded. "That's right," he confirmed.

Wetherell's face seemed to whiten still more.

"Who did they steal those steers from?" he asked.

"That guy lying over there by the gallery is Dave Clell," said Jeff, answering for Bland. "He and his riders have got a cache in the North Basin. It's fifty or sixty miles from here. They're wild men. Clell was the leader, and the worst of the lot. You do well to thank Bland for killin' him. But if his riders find out what has happened there will be the devil to pay."

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"We've got to get those bodies out of the way," said Wetherell. "There's no telling whether some more of his men were followin' him."

"It ain't likely there was any more of them," said Jeff. "If there was any more intendin' to come they'd have been with him. I figured that Clell and the other two probably crossed the trail of the stolen steers and whoever was with Punditt when he picked them up, and that they passed right on to find out where they'd been driven. Maybe they intended to go back for the rest of the gang afterward, but when they busted in here and found nobody home but the women, they decided to get even, seein' as how the steers had been driven north, out of the country, after hitting your range. We can toss them saddles and bridles under the hay in the stable, and we can rebrand their horses and turn 'em loose."

JEFF'S advice was followed, and the three outlaws were loaded into a wagon and taken far up the river, where they were buried. Their rifles were left in the saddle sheaths, but their other arms and their cartridge belts were buried with them.

It was dusk when these tasks were finished, and Bland, Jeff and Wetherell sat on a bench in front of the bunk house until nearly midnight, talking.

Twice a day, for several days following the killing of Clell, Bland and Jeff rode the east basin, following the progress of the Herefords as they moved along seeking new grazing.

They saw little of Wetherell, and still less of Della and Mrs. Wetherell. Riding out at dawn, the ranch house was silent. Riding in at dusk they sometimes saw Della and Wetherell and his wife seated on the gallery, talking. Occasionally they observed that Wetherell's horse had been ridden, and twice, coming in, they had seen Wetherell out in the west basin, riding toward the ranch house.

Wetherell was conscious of a change in himself. He was restless and uneasy. Various new thoughts were assailing him. He was aware that some strange influence was at work in him. He did not know exactly what was wrong with him, but since the killing of Clell a change had come over him. A change in his way of looking at things.

Undoubtedly Della's narrow escape had something to do with it. On the night following the incident he had not been able to sleep and he had spent the greater part of the time staring out of the window, wondering just how he would have felt if Clell and his men had succeeded in taking Della with them into the vast wilderness of the North Basin. The chances were that he would never have seen her again.

He shuddered and cringed at the thought.

He would have been to blame, for it had been at his suggestion that Punditt and the Double Cross outfit had made that foray into the north country.

Losing Della, sacrificing her to his greed, would have been the result if it had not been for Bland.

Twice within the past few weeks he had almost paid for his transgressions. He was beginning to realize that in this wild country the administering of justice was swift and sure. Men did not invoke the aid of the law in the settling of their differences. The grim code they followed was their own.

Wetherell was under no misapprehensions regarding the state of his feelings. He knew that fear was overtaking him. He had no fatuous conviction that his moral structure was in

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process of changing. He knew that he was as he had always been, and that if he were able to continue his transgressions without fear of punishment, swift and certain, he would have entertained no thought of changing his attitude.

And yet perhaps, insidiously, the atmosphere of this great, wild country had influenced him. He knew that at times he had been impressed by its bigness. There had been occasions when he had seemed to be almost on the verge of interpreting the whispered threats that were borne to him upon the breezes; when he had been strangely oppressed by the appalling magnitude of this section of the world, by its brooding, mocking atmosphere.

No feelings of remorse stirred him, or of regret. Yet he was beginning to realize that there must be something more in life than what he had already experienced. Vaguely, before coming west, he had understood this, but within the last few days his vision and his comprehension seemed to be clearer.

THERE was Teasdale. And Bland. Something about Bland, especially, attracted him. He knew, of course, that Bland had agreed to work for him, knowing that he had stolen the Cross-in-a-Box yearlings. Therefore it was obvious that Bland was also not averse to taking things, particularly cattle, belonging to other persons. But Bland, he perceived, was not greedy. Bland might steal cattle, but he would do so in a spirit of mischief. And in spite of this there was a wholesomeness about Bland that he had felt. A manliness and sturdiness of character that, disregarding his cattle-stealing impulse, could be felt, Wetherell decided, by any man or woman.

And that moral sturdiness and wholesomeness had affected Wetherell. He did not know how, just yet, but it was an influence that he knew was disturbing him.

He knew that his wife and Della were aware of the fact that the Double Cross outfit had stolen cattle from Clell. Neither of the women had spoken to him about it, but from their actions and from the way they avoided speaking of the dead outlaw, he judged they were wondering if he had ordered the raid. He got the impression that they were waiting for him to speak, but he, so far, had avoided all reference to the incident.

He had little to say to the women, for he felt he knew what they were thinking, and he was ashamed of himself. Here, too, was a phase of the peculiar mental condition that had overtaken him, for this was the first time in his life that he had been able to realize or understand that other persons could see him as he actually was. Also, it was the first time, to his knowledge, that he had been so careless as to permit any one to have an opportunity to suspect him.

Back East he had covered his tracks. That was because he had had only the law to fool, while out here, to succeed, he had to fool men. And men, especially the type of men he had been dealing with, were not, apparently, to be fooled. And if by any chance they discovered that they had been fooled, they did not hesitate to strike suddenly in revenge.

He had come out here intending to live quietly and honestly upon the money he had stolen from the Addison estate, but he had soon discovered that the old urge to appropriate property belonging to others was still strong in him. Now he was discovering un-

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suspected hazards. Twice his life had been threatened, and he had lost twenty-five thousand dollars. More important than the loss of the money or the possible loss of his own life, was the fact that by his actions he was endangering the lives of his wife and daughter. He must be more careful.

CHAPTER XVI.

PUNDITT VS. BLAND.

LATE in the afternoon, about a week following the killing of Clell, the Double Cross outfit returned from selling the stolen stock.

Wetherell, Della and Mrs. Wetherell were down at the corrals, fence opposite the stable, looking at Bland's horse, which though having been ridden a great deal that day, was playfully cavorting around the enclosure.

"There's no brand on him," said Della. "That's strange, isn't it?"

"Well, it is unusual," returned Wetherell. "It's a fine horse, pedigreed, I suppose, and perhaps Bland didn't want to spoil his looks by branding him. Bland's peculiar."

"I don't like him," declared Della; "but I'm certain I shall never forget him as he stood at the corner of the gallery that day, looking at Clell. He was wild, father, and terrible. And yet he was cool. He intended to kill Clell, but he didn't reach for his gun until he was sure that his bullet wouldn't hit me. That was why I bit Clell's arm."

"Bland's all right, Della," said Wetherell. "True, he's a dangerous man, and he must be able to handle a gun or he wouldn't have had any chance with Clell. Clell was a professional gunman. Jeff was telling me that everybody in this section of the country was scared of him."

"Bland wasn't afraid," declared Della. "I know, for I saw him when he shot the other outlaws. He stood there like a rock while the two outlaws were shooting at him. He was so steady and deliberate that you might have thought he was shooting at a target. That's what frightens me. He's so serene and calm in the way he does things. No matter what he intends to do he will do it, and nobody will be able to stop him unless they kill him."

"Did you thank him for what he did for you and your mother, Della?"

"No," replied Della.

"Seems you shouldn't neglect that," said Wetherell.

Della did not answer.

Wetherell glanced sharply at her, but Mrs. Wetherell smiled inscrutably.

They saw the Double Cross outfit, led by Punditt, loping their horses down the river bank toward the corrals. The riders were laughing and joking with one another as they passed the ranch house, the foreman's shanty and the bunk and mess houses. They saw Bland and Jeff sitting on a bench in front of the bunk house, and for an instant the laughter and talk died, and then resumed again.

There was now a confusion of sound at the corral gates, and Wetherell and the two women were partially hidden in a cloud of dust that rose from the hoofs of the horses of the outfit.

Mrs. Wetherell and Della escaped from the dust cloud and retreated to a point several yards distant, but Wetherell stood his ground.

THE other men, ten in all, slid off their horses, pulled off the saddles and bridles, opened the corral gates and turned the animals into the enclosure. From the expressions of their faces and their eagerness, it was

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apparent that they were glad to get back. They paused only long enough to greet Wetherell and the two women, and to take care of their saddles and bridles, and then they swarmed toward the mess house, again laughing and joking.

However, Punditt delayed. He bowed extravagantly to Della and Mrs. Wetherell, and he gave Della a glance that caused Mrs. Wetherell's brow to wrinkle in a frown.

Punditt was a good looking man, and yet Mrs. Wetherell saw something in him that repelled her. She had often felt that Punditt was too aware of his attractions. He reminded her of a sleek, wild animal. There was a slight swagger in his every movement, which, Mrs. Wetherell decided, resulted from an inflated conception of his powers. In other walks of life she had met such men, and her experience with them had been that they always overestimated themselves, or that they had accomplished certain conquests which they had not been able to forget.

It also appeared to her that under Punditt's sleekness there was cunning and cruelty. She had decided that as long as Punditt could have his own way one could get along with him, but that if he should be crossed, or if his lust or passion were provoked by something desirable, he would be vicious and malignant. She had not quietly watched Punditt for nothing, and she had observed Punditt's bold interest in Della, and she had seen that Della had been flattered by his attitude.

It may have been that Punditt was aware of Mrs. Wetherell's animosity, or perhaps he had seen the frown, for after bowing to Della he caused his horse to leap spectacularly toward the corral gate. There he dismounted.

Mrs. Wetherell and Della walked back to the ranch house, but Wetherell stayed. Later, from the gallery, Mrs. Wetherell saw her husband standing by the closed corral gates earnestly talking with Punditt. She did not, of course, overhear the conversation between the two men.

"Well, we pulled it off," said Punditt. "Fifty-four head. Twenty dollars a head, which ain't half bad. One thousand and eighty." He significantly slapped a pocket of his trousers.

"Don't give it to me here, Punditt, my wife is watching," said Wetherell. "I'll get it from you some other time." His voice changed. "There's been the devil to pay, Punditt. You got hold of some steers belonging to Dave Clell and his bunch of hellions, and a few days ago Clell himself and two of his men rode down here, having trailed you from where you picked up the steers. They saw where you'd been intending to brand them in the clearing back there on the slope and they trailed the herd and your outfit to the pass through the mountains. Seems they lost the trail, there, probably in that long stretch of rocky country, so they came back here, found there were no men here, and decided that this outfit had done the stealing.

"Clell knocked my wife down, grabbed Della and was making off with her, intending to take her to his cache, I suppose. Me and Jeff were east with a bunch of yearlings that I bought from Teasdale, and we didn't know what was going on. If it hadn't been for Jim Bland, Clell would have got Della."

PUNDITT'S eyes were wide and glittering. He was rigid with interest and he spoke hoarsely. "What did Bland do?" he asked.

"Punditt, he killed Clell. Beat him

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to the draw and downed him in a square fight."

"The devil you say!"

Punditt was incredulous, and he stared at Wetherell with bulging, amazed eyes.

"Where did this happen?"

"Right there in front of the gallery."

"In a fair fight, you say?" inquired Punditt. It seemed he was seeking confirmation; that he did not yet believe.

"And after he killed Clell, he killed the two riders that were with Clell. First one and then the other. In a fair fight, too," added Wetherell.

"Blazes! Wetherell, I ain't sayin' I don't believe you, but you've got to show me!"

"Did you ever see Clell, Punditt?"

"I sure have seen him."

"He was an extra big man, with a black beard and black hair. He had a nose with a hump on it, and he wore two guns."

"That's him," conceded Punditt. "What did you do with the bodies?"

"They were buried up the river a couple of miles."

"Where's their horses?"

"Turned loose."

"Their saddles and bridles?"

"Under the hay in the stable."

"Where's their rifles?"

"They're under the hay, too."

Punditt now appeared to be convinced. He drew a great, long breath, and stared hard at Wetherell.

"There's certain to be trouble if Clell's gang hears of this," he said. "But if you don't say anything more about it and Bland don't shoot off his mouth, maybe his gang will never know where Clell and the other two guys went."

"Bland won't say anything," said Wetherell. "He ain't the talking kind."

WETHERELL saw that Punditt's manner had changed. His eyes were now gleaming with a sullen light.

"I know you told me and the boys a day or two before we left that you'd hired a man named Jim Bland for range boss. That's all right with me. I reckon you know your own business, and I ain't wailin' because you didn't pick me for the job. But we're all in this together, and I ain't takin' any chances on havin' some sneak get the goods on me. What do you know about this Jim Bland?"

"Nothing but what I told you," returned Wetherell. "That Bland took the blame when Teasdale caught me running off his yearlings."

"You told me that when Bland took the blame Teasdale and his men didn't see him. He wasn't runnin' his neck into a whole lot of danger by just shootin' off his mouth while he was hidin' in some rocks."

"There's something about him that makes me believe that when he gives his word he keeps it," said Wetherell.

"There's something about the cuss that I don't like," snarled Punditt.

Hatred was now flaming in Punditt's eyes. He had disclaimed any feeling of resentment against Wetherell for naming Bland as his superior, but it was apparent that a jealous passion stirred him now.

He turned and looked in the direction of the bunk house, and saw the men of the outfit standing near the bench upon which Jeff sat with Bland. The men were laughing, indicating that they were finding Bland interesting. Punditt turned from this scene to face Wetherell again.

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"Well," he said, his lips curving into a crooked smile, "I reckon the new range boss and me ain't goin' to get along very well."

"I wouldn't go ridin' him, Punditt," warned Wetherell. "He ain't to be monkeyed with."

"No-o?" sneered Punditt. He carried saddle and bridle into the stable.

Wetherell went to the ranch house, where he joined his wife and Della. A few minutes later he saw Punditt moving across the level toward the mess house.

Bland appeared to settle into his new job easily and quietly. Whatever conditions had existed previous to Bland's taking charge of the outfit, there now ensued a régime of orderliness and activity.

Some of the men were set to repairing the fences of the horse and cattle corrals, others were detailed to clean up around the ranch house yard, the stables and the other buildings; still others were put to work getting the wagons repaired, and others were sent out on the range to work with the cattle.

After a week or so of Bland's supervision, Wetherell spoke to his wife and Della about the new man.

"Bland knows his business," he said. "No matter where he's from, he's had experience in running men. And he knows the cattle business."

CHAPTER XVII.

DELLA BREAKS HER SILENCE.

AFTER the spring branding had been finished, there followed long, lazy days when there was little to be done except ride the range in search of strays, minister to the sick, clear out a salt lick here and there, drive cattle out of the timber, earmark the calves, brand whatever mavericks appeared, and perform the other routine tasks of ranch existence.

It all proceeded smoothly, so smoothly that Wetherell voiced his amazement to his wife and Della.

Wetherell was enthusiastic about his new range boss, but Mrs. Wetherell merely smiled and Della did not appear to listen.

So far as Bland knew there had been no further rustling by the Double Cross outfit. The men, with the exception of Jeff and Quillan, were indolent and careless, and there was a great deal of drinking among them. They were quarrelsome when drinking, but Bland had found no way to prevent their obtaining whisky. Their work took them far down the eastern basin, within twenty or thirty miles of town, which was a comparatively short ride. Their attitude toward him had been one of tolerance, merely, he had decided.

He was certain that Punditt was envious of him, and he suspected that Punditt was losing no opportunity to foment trouble. He had observed that the outfit obeyed his orders in silence, and that at no time had the men exhibited interest or enthusiasm in their work. They did only what conditions and circumstances compelled them to do, and there had been times when Bland had perceived that his orders were received with an indifferent shrug or with an unconcern that might be interpreted as contempt. Still, there had been no visible disobedience, no disturbances of any kind. Yet he was not accepted into the peculiar fellowship which governed the relations of the men to one another. All talk ceased when he appeared among them, and he was watched furtively and searchingly.

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He had no desire to enter the fellowship. The outfit accorded him the tribute of its respect, which was manifested by the silence they maintained in his presence. He had no doubt that this respect was merely an acknowledgment of his familiarity with his work and of his insistence upon having the daily tasks performed in strict accordance with his orders.

In the five or six weeks that had elapsed since the shooting of Clell, Bland had inspected the entire Double Cross range, from the high country northward to the mountain range on the southerly side of the basin, and from the divide where Wetherell had stolen the Cross-in-a-Box yearlings, to the eastern end of the basin; a distance of approximately sixty miles.

The basin was about fifty miles wide at a point where the southern mountain range curved widely southward, and where the upland country opened in a wide sweep northeastward. The floor of the basin, except for the section surrounding the Double Cross ranch house, was cut by gorges, seamed by ridges and rocky excrescences, dotted by low, bald knobs, bare ridges, bastioned towers of rock and rugged buttes that marked the cañons. There was plenty of grass for Wetherell's cattle. The cattle had not been accurately tallied, for Bland was certain that there were more than the three thousand head reported by the outfit.

But that detail was not important.

More important in Bland's thoughts was Della.

SINCE the day of the killing she had seemed to avoid him, and on the few occasions that he had met her he had observed that a change had come over her. She was more serious, her eyes appeared to be more thoughtful, her lips were firmer. Also, while it was obvious that she disliked him, there was in her attitude toward him a singular deference, a reluctant respect. He was aware that she was avoiding him, but he made no effort to deliberately place himself in her way. And then one morning when he was saddling the black horse at the corral gate he saw Della step down from the gallery of the ranch house and walk toward him. He instantly straightened, removed his hat and stood, waiting. He had not spoken to her since the killing of Clell, and he had resolved that he would not attempt to break down the barrier of reserve that she had erected. He stood, gravely watching her, as she stopped a few feet from him, apparently undecided.

He did not speak. He merely waited.

"Bland," she said quietly, "father doesn't feel well to-day, but he expects to be all right to-morrow. And to-morrow he wants you to ride to Lazette with him. You know about the note he gave Teasdale, of course. If you don't, I think you must suspect. When Teasdale and his men were here that day, threatening to hang father for taking those Cross-in-a-Box yearlings, father gave Teasdale a note made out to J. B. Templeton, the owner of the Cross-in-a-Box. The note was for fifteen thousand dollars.

"Teasdale wanted twenty-five thousand dollars in cash, but father only had ten thousand in the house, and so he gave Teasdale the note for fifteen thousand. That was to complete the payment for the yearlings. The note is past due, and Teasdale has sent word that if it isn't paid the day after to-morrow he will take possession of the Double Cross. Father wants you to ride to Lazette with him to-morrow morning, and then go with him to the

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Cross-in-a-Box to pay Teasdale the money."

"All right, ma'am. He'll be starting early, I reckon?"

"At daylight."

Della half turned, as if to leave. She turned back, faced Bland, and a flush stained her cheeks. She looked straight into Bland's eyes, however, and her own were level and steady, but not as hostile as he had seen them. He perceived that they were faintly agleam with the reluctant respect that he had previously observed.

"BLAND," she said, "I want to thank you for your heroism in killing Clell."

"Why, ma'am," he protested mildly, "I reckon it wasn't anything that deserves any thanks. You would not expect me to stand there and let a man carry off the daughter of my employer."

Della shuddered.

"Bland," she said, horror of the incident still apparently lingering in her memory, "that was the first time I ever saw a man killed. It was terrible. I feel that I shall never forget it. And I have been wondering about you. I should think that you would keep on seeing Clell, and those other men, in your dreams all your life."

"I've heard of such things, ma'am. And I reckon that if Clell had been an innocent man, or if I had taken advantage of him, I might be bothered, thinking of him. The same way with the others. But I don't reckon that was murder, ma'am. It comes right down to this. I had a choice. I could let Clell and his men kill me, or I could kill them. I just decided that I would be better pleased if I stayed alive. That's all there is to it, ma'am. To think any other way would be to regret that I didn't let Clell kill me and carry you off."

"I think you are a philosopher, Bland," she said, regarding him soberly.

"It doesn't take much philosophy to want to keep on living, ma'am."

"Oh, it was terrible!" she said.

"There certainly wasn't much time to do any serious thinking about the hereafter. Any argument that I might have had with myself wouldn't have done me much good if I hadn't been concentrating on what Clell was doing."

"I never will forget you as you stood there, getting ready to draw your gun."

"I reckon it wasn't a pretty picture, ma'am."

She was watching him intently, wonderingly.

"I believe you are telling the truth—that the killing hasn't affected you at all. I can't understand what kind of a man you are."

"That's because you're not acquainted with me," he said, looking straight at her and smiling faintly. "I've tried my best to get acquainted with you, but you keep on saying that you hate me. I'm convinced that you think you mean it. I don't know why you hate me. I don't think I've ever done anything to deserve it, and so it must be that it's my character or appearance.

"I can't help it that I look as I do, and so there's no argument about that, and if you hate me on that account, why, that's all right, ma'am. But if it's my character that you're taking exception to, why, I don't think you know anything about that. And just to be square with each other I think you ought to go riding with me once or twice, so that you could get well enough acquainted with me to be able

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to judge me with some degree of accuracy."

SHE had listened to him and had watched him closely, with an interest that she had not before exhibited. And now she said quietly, with mockery in her eyes: "I think that is only fair. Some day, after a while, I may accept your invitation."

He was too wise to appear elated over this concession. He knew that any exhibition of emotion might readily be construed as triumph. And so he said gravely: "Thank you, ma'am."

She turned quickly and walked to the house. He watched her for a moment, soberly endeavoring to keep his satisfaction from becoming visible. Only his eyes betrayed the joy that pulsed through his veins.

He rode on his way, thinking of himself and Della. Two months ago he would have scoffed at any one who might have told him that he was soon to fall in love. And now it had happened.

"A man certainly doesn't receive any warning about when it's going to come," was his thought. "Things are moving along smoothly in the way that they've been accustomed to moving, and then he sees a woman's face. At first, she's only a woman to him, and he's all right if he keeps right on moving. But if he waits to take a second look, he begins to see that she's mighty desirable. That is, of course, if she is desirable. He's got to be the sole judge of that. And then what happens to him? Exactly what happened to me, I reckon."

He rode on until he found Jeff Lefingwell, and the two dismounted from their horses and lounged in the shade of a butte, close to the creek.

They talked long, and when they parted Jeff rode westward along the line of the southern foothills, while Bland rode eastward in search of the outfit.

That night Jeff rode in late. It was about midnight when he stabled his horse and strode softly across the level between the corral and bunk house.

The moonlight was strong and Jeff saw that there were no horses in the corral, except Bland's and Wetherell's and two ponies that Della alternated in riding. So Jeff passed the bunk house without stopping and walked to the foreman's shanty, where he whistled softly at one of the windows.

Bland's voice answered.

"That you, Jeff?"

"Yep."

Jeff walked slowly toward the bunk house.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AMBUSHED.

THE trail to Lazette ran along the base of the foothills on the southern edge of the basin of the Double Cross range. From where Bland and Wetherell were riding, eastward, they could not see the Double Cross herd. It was noon and they had ridden about half the distance to town, and they should now be about opposite the herd. There was a wide, level range northward, but Bland and Wetherell could not see it, for they were thirty or forty miles south of the range and there was a wild section of country intervening.

The dry season had come, and everywhere the land was beginning to bake and shrivel in the white-hot glare of the sun.

Shortly after noon Wetherell and Bland rode down a slope to an arroyo,

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which they followed for a little distance to a gorge. A hundred yards down the gorge Wetherell brought his horse to a halt at the edge of a tiny stream of water that trickled among the rocks.

Here he and Bland built a small fire. From the depths of a rocky cavern Wetherell drew a battered tin coffee pot. From his slicker roll at the cantle of his saddle he produced coffee, some dried beef and soda biscuits. The two men lunched, while the horses grazed along the slope they had just descended.

Wetherell had talked little during the trip, and Bland's conversation had been confined to monosyllabic replies. That was one thing that Wetherell liked about Bland. He didn't break in upon a man's thoughts. And Wetherell was thoughtful.

He was thinking about the fifteen thousand dollars that he was going to pay to Teasdale. He felt that a monstrous injustice had been done him. He knew that the yearlings were not worth the sum that Teasdale had demanded, and he was wondering if he could evade paying it.

He had not any too much money left. He had invested fifty thousand dollars in the ranch, and he had spent many thousands more in securing breeders, in making repairs on the ranch house, in paying wages for a year when there had been no stock to sell. And now after he had paid the fifteen thousand dollars to Teasdale, his reserve in the bank at Lazette would not be large enough to give him a feeling of security. To be sure he had, he estimated, about four thousand head of cattle, not including the yearlings he had stolen from Teasdale, and if the market happened to be good in the fall, and his herd escaped sickness, he would be able to get back a great deal of the money he had invested.

And be able, perhaps, to show a profit. Four thousand head. Of that number there would probably be twenty-five hundred two-year-olds ready for the market, and if the market held, as it had last year, at thirty dollars, he would have seventy-five thousand dollars.

Not so bad. He could get by all right.

But the fifteen thousand that he was forced to pay Teasdale worried him. At the time he had sat on his horse with a rope around his neck it had seemed an insignificant price to pay for his life, but now that he could no longer feel the rope the sum seemed hugely out of proportion to his offense.

HE wanted to talk to Bland about Teasdale, but it was mid-afternoon, and he and Bland were riding side by side when he finally spoke.

"Bland," he said, "do you know Teasdale?"

"I've seen him," returned Bland. "That day in the pass when you stole the yearlings. I had sized up Teasdale and his riders, and I knew that if any trouble came it would be Teasdale that I would have to shoot. Teasdale's got grit, and when he sets out to do a thing he'll do it."

"Then you reckon I'd better pay Teasdale the fifteen thousand?"

"Shucks, you weren't figuring on trying to get out of paying it, Wetherell?"

"Well, no, I wasn't. But fifteen thousand more, after paying him ten, is a lot of money."

"I figure my neck to be worth

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more," said Bland dryly. He smiled at Wetherell.

"Wetherell," he added, "it's been my experience that cattle rustlers always find a rope waiting for them somewhere. Sooner or later they run into a man who won't take money for stolen stock. Teasdale's price was high. I reckon he let you off on account of your wife and daughter. Do you suppose they would have come out here with you if they had known what was going to happen?"

"No," admitted Wetherell, "they wouldn't."

They rode along in silence for several miles, and then Wetherell looked at Bland.

"You preaching?" he said.

Bland smiled again.

"I reckon I came mighty close to it, for a fact," he said. "There was a time when I didn't feel that way. But as we grow older we get more thoughts, and if we have kept our eyes open we are bound to see that the people who steal things don't get along so well, and are pretty apt to die suddenly. While I'm willing to steal cattle for you and take my commission from the sales, I don't mind telling you that I'm not stuck on it. Do you ever feel that way, Wetherell?"

Wetherell appeared to meditate. Then he laughed.

"I had some such feelings as that both times the Cross-in-a-Box men had a rope around my neck. I don't know just how it was. Life looked pretty good to me then. Somehow I got to thinking about things. I felt mean and cheap, and could see how big and fine this country was, and the world, and how it must feel to be square. But soon as the rope was off my neck I felt different about it. Felt as though I'd had a sort of dream. Whatever it was, I couldn't hold it, and right now it's all got away from me and I feel just as I did before. Heck, Bland, a man's entitled to take what he can get."

"I've taken things from people that later I wanted to give back to them," said Bland. "Do you ever have that feeling, Wetherell?"

"I can't say that I do," returned Wetherell. "People that don't know enough to hang on to what they've got hadn't ought to complain if somebody with more sense than they have comes along and takes it away from them."

"There's this angle, Wetherell. It's sort of exciting to match wits with a man that's as smart as you are, or maybe a little smarter. If you beat him, you've got cause to congratulate yourself. And I'd say that if in matching wits with him you'd take an advantage that he didn't see, or that was not quite lawful, you wouldn't feel any sympathy for him, because you'd know that he should have been smart enough to anticipate you. But that doesn't go when the one you take advantage of isn't as smart as you, or if it's a woman. What do you think, Wetherell?"

"I say take it wherever you can find it," declared Wetherell.

Bland questioned Wetherell no further. It was apparent that Wetherell, in spite of his change of heart when his life was in danger, had no regrets for his past misdeeds.

THEY reached Lazette at dusk, at the hour when the town was lighting its kerosene lamps and preparing for its nightly activities.

There was nothing distinctive about Lazette. Its buildings were scattered along an open space which was termed a street, though it resembled a miniature mountain range with its systems of ridges and sandlike corrugations.

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Adobe clay, pressed into huge channels by wagon wheels through the course of a winter, cavernous chuckholes which careful drivers avoided, were now baked and cracked by the sun or pulverized to a light, feathery dust that swirled and eddied upward, to spread over Lazette's buildings.

Dozens of cow ponies stood at various hitching racks. Here and there was a wagon.

The bank was closed, and therefore Wetherell and Bland would have to stay in town overnight unless they succeeded in finding the banker and prevailing upon him to open his institution and honor Wetherell's request for money.

Wetherell made no effort to find the banker.

He declared that a sixty mile ride was enough for him, and that now that he was in town he purposed to make a night of it. Bland agreed to stay, but declared he was tired and would go to bed. Therefore after taking the horses to a livery stable Bland sought a rooming house, undressed, and went to sleep.

Wetherell had evidently kept his word to make a night of it, for when Bland sought him the following morning he learned that Wetherell had gone to bed just before dawn in another rooming house. When Bland appeared at his bedside about mid-morning, thinking that Wetherell had slept long enough, Wetherell reluctantly got up, dressed, drank a cup of vile coffee, and went across the street to the bank, where he drew out fifteen thousand dollars.

Wetherell was glum and sullen. He had made a night of it and had spent over a thousand dollars in doing it, most of which he had lost playing poker.

Riding out of town he confided to Bland that the sum he had lost was the money he had received from Punditt from the sale of the cattle stolen from Clell.

"My luck don't seem to be running right," he complained.

"Money that a man gets that way never seems to want to stay in one place," said Bland. "Seems sort of nervous like," he added. "I've noticed that more than once. How many thieves die rich?"

LAZETTE was out of sight behind them when Wetherell again spoke. He had been considering Bland's question for he finally answered:

"Not many, I suppose."

"Not many what?" questioned Bland.

"Not many thieves die rich," said Wetherell. "Wasn't that what you said back there a ways?"

"Yes," answered Bland. "How many do you know? Count them on your fingers and you'll have fingers to spare. Seems that when a man's greed gets the best of him he sort of gets out of step with himself. He loses his balance, and he seems to have no conception of the value of money. Just throws it around, wastes it, and then goes after more. While he's getting it he's missing all the good things in life.

"Maybe he's got a family. He does not care about that, whether or not he's going right by them. He's just selfish, I reckon."

"You preaching?" inquired Wetherell, mockingly.

"Just thinking, Wetherell. Don't pay any attention to me."

They had started late. They rode out into the big basin, following the

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south trail, the mountains wheeling around them, the vast wilderness through which they rode greeting them with its brooding silence. The hot breath of the valley pressed against them, the aching desolation enveloped them. They were merely two moving dots on the great dun waste, and yet each dot busied himself with thoughts that seemed important to him.

Wetherell's mind was occupied with thoughts of his gambling loss, and the fifteen thousand he was to pay to Teasdale, which he had placed in a pocket of his trousers.

Bland's thoughts were of Wetherell and his family. Twice he had tentatively broached the subject of reform to Wetherell. He had sought to learn if Wetherell entertained any regrets for what he had done, and he had discovered that apparently the man had no intention of reforming.

Wetherell had confessed that occasionally he had vaguely realized that honesty and square dealing were ennobling virtues that he had never experienced.

And he had also admitted to Bland that he had perceived a dim analogy between the mighty forces of nature and his own comprehension of the virtues. But as he had told Bland, his thoughts that day had been somewhat inchoate and nebulous and he had not been able to interpret them. His thoughts as well as his speech had been inarticulate. Even the images that had flashed upon his mental vision at that time had vanished, and he remembered very little about them.

Bland had experienced an impulse of mercy toward Wetherell, and he had considered withholding punishment, for Della's sake. But now he perceived that mercy to Wetherell would not alter the man's determination to continue his transgressions. So he rode along, saying nothing more.

They were about halfway home when the sun went down. The soft colors of the afterglow were swimming above the rimming mountains of the basin when they reached the place where they had halted and lunched the day before.

This was in a rather wild, broken section featured by hills, giant rocks, gorges and cañons, and when they rode down the arroyo to the gorge where they had watered their horses, the strange, brooding hush of twilight had come.

They dismounted and stood close together while the horses drank. Then Wetherell reached into the rock cavern, drew out the battered coffee pot that he had returned to the place after making coffee in it the day before, knelt at the little stream of water, rinsed the coffee pot, filled it and passed it to Bland.

Bland was drinking when from the shadows of some great rocks behind the men came a voice.

"All right," it said, "keep a-standing right where you are! Don't move or we'll blow you apart!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

A LITTLE, leering gold skull clutched in a dead man's hand—that was the clew marking the start of a trail of mystery across the South Seas. Don't miss "The Gold Skull Murders," by FRANK L. PACKARD, starting September 26.

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"Wow, how it hurts!"

Suspicious Symptoms

Bad bargains, drifters Bill and Jim decide, are like hospitals and jails—easy to get into but hard to get out of

By JOHN H. THOMPSON

BILL ostentatiously transferred his good luck token to a pocket guarded by a buttoned flap and then gingerly shook hands with Mickey.

I didn't blame him for being cautious because I knew Mickey as well as Bill did. Back in the days when we were traveling with Beary's carnival, Mickey was so light-fingered that the bearded lady carried burglary insurance on her beard and the cashier of the show had a standing order to shoot on sight if Mickey approached within ten feet of the money wagon.

Then some patron raised a howl when upon reaching for his watch he found Mickey's fingers there first. The cops came and Mickey went. Later the news percolated back to the carnival grounds that Mickey had been soaked with an extra term for stealing the gavel off the sheriff's desk and picking the jailer's pockets.

Under the circumstances we weren't particularly anxious to resume friend-

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ship with Mickey, but he happened to see us first, and after all, an old carnival man is an old carnival man, regardless of whether he is wearing a plain suit or something in a striped effect designed for visibility for target purposes.

"I've reformed," Mickey announced reassuringly. "I've—by jiminy, you two loafers have come along just in the nick of time. You can help me out. You—"

"We haven't got any money for bail for nobody," interposed Bill coldly.

"Who said anything about bail?" countered Mickey. "Didn't I tell youse I've reformed? No more of that chicken feed stuff for me. I'm hitting big business now—bigger profits."

"And bigger sentences if they nab you," remarked Bill. "Well, we were glad to have seen you again, but we've got to be—"

"Just a minute; just a minute," interposed Mickey. "You boys just hang around on this corner for a little while. Watch for me. I'm going to blow along on a bus. Keep your eyes open, look at your watch and notice the number on the bus. That ain't much for a guy to ask a couple of friends, old carnival pals at that."

"What's the big idea?" demanded Bill. "Jim and I ain't going to get mixed up with any phony stuff."

"Oh, this is on the level," declared Mickey reassuringly. "I'm coming right back. All I'm asking you to do is to wait here and have dinner with me."

"Dinner?" Bill sighed happily. "Why didn't you mention dinner in the first place? Jim and I haven't had a bite to eat since supper last night. So long as you aren't asking us to pull off anything crooked we'll wait here for you."

"Fine," ejaculated Mickey enthusiastically. He departed without further ado.

Bill and I were still speculating as to what this latest gag was, agreeing on only one point, that inasmuch as it was under the personal management of Mickey Caderwaller, it involved something crooked, when a bus came along and slowed up at the curb to let a passenger alight.

THE passenger proved to be Mickey. Just as he was about to step off the bus, he stumbled over his own foot and almost fell. He quickly regained his balance, however, alighted and joined us on the sidewalk.

"Two ten P. M.; bus number 2389! Get that?" said Mickey. "Corner of Main and Water Streets. You boys saw me fall. Something wrong with the step. Either that or the driver started up too quickly. I've injured my ankle. Wow, how it hurts!" He hopped on one foot, holding the other with his hands.

"Wait, it's the other ankle, I guess," he remarked abruptly. "It's too danged uncomfortable hopping on the left foot." He calmly reversed the procedure.

"You didn't hurt nothing," interposed Bill coldly.

"You saw me stumble, didn't you?" snapped Mickey angrily.

"Yeh, over your own big feet," Bill conceded.

"Well, I've sprained my ankle and if the bus company doesn't come across with at least $25, I'll sue 'em," said Mickey.

"Why not tell 'em you sprained your liver or something and claim $250?" remarked Bill sarcastically.

Mickey gave Bill an enthusiastic

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swat on the back that sent him reeling against a telephone pole.

"The same brilliant mind, untarnished by the ravages of age," ejaculated Mickey admiringly, as Bill sputtered indignantly to regain his breath. "It's my liver—the pain is terrific." He stopped hopping and tentatively felt his chest. "I must have wrenched my liver as I fell. Where in thunder is a guy's liver located, anyway?" he demanded.

"Search me," replied Bill. "Come on, Jim, we might as well be—".

"Come with me, boys, we're going to have a good old feed," interposed Mickey hurriedly.

Bill paused uncertainly. After all, we hadn't had a bite to eat since the night before.

"Tenderloin steak smothered in onions, apple pie and other stuff," said Mickey.

"Tenderloin steak smothered in onions." Bill echoed it reverently. "What do you say, Jim?" He turned to me.

"We don't have to tell any lies," I pointed out judicially. "We saw Mickey stumble when he got off the bus.

"Maybe his liver does hurt him. If he had a conscience I'd say perhaps it was his conscience hurting him. But then it isn't up to us to say whether or not he ripped his gears. On the other hand it certainly wouldn't be right for us to virtually commit suicide by refusing to eat."

"That's right, too," agreed Bill. "My conscience wouldn't let me starve myself to death. And think of the poor tenderloin steak smothering under a heavy blanket of onions! I couldn't stand that. Lead the way, Mickey," he added cheerfully. "Too bad you won't be able to eat, too."

"Who said I wouldn't be able to eat?" demanded Mickey rather belligerently.

"But your injured liver?" said Bill.

"I never let business interfere with pleasure," said Mickey with dignity, and he led the way toward a white-fronted soup parlor on the corner.

ALONG in the second round of pie he started groaning. "I'm just practicing a bit," he remarked reassuringly. "I've got to convince the doctor that my interior plumbing is nothing but a tangled mass of wrecked piping or he won't sign a certificate for me."

He pushed back his empty plate with a sigh of comfort and beckoned to the counterman.

"How much, buddy?" he asked. "Come on, you bums," he added to us. "Be getting ready for a quick move. We don't want to be hanging around this place."

For an instant I thought from his words that he was up to some crooked trick and was planning to duck the bill.

"Three sixty," said the counterman.

I was relieved when Mickey fished into his pocket and pulled out a small sheaf of new bank notes. He laid down two crisp two-dollar bills. "Keep the change," he directed airily. "Come on, fellows."

He grabbed his hat and strolled hurriedly out of the place. We had to step along fast to keep up with him.

"Remember, Mickey, we aren't going to tell no lies to any claim agent, even though you have blown us to a pair of good feeds," Bill reminded him warningly as we headed down the street. "Jim and I have got consciences."

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"All you have to do is to tell the claim agent that you saw me fall from the bus," said Mickey reassuringly. "I'm not asking you to perform any autopsies. I can take care of my own liver. It's just a matter of hypnotizing a physician by launching a boatload of symptoms on a sea of groans. Leave that part to me. After I put on my harrowing little act he'll give me a paper that 'll clinch my case against the bus company."

Bill paused in sudden dismay.

"Holy mackerel!" he ejaculated. "We left our satchel in the restaurant. All our stock of Indian Oil is in it. Come on back with me for a minute."

Mickey snapped around angrily. He always was an impatient, hot-tempered cuss.

"You danged fool. You can't—" He caught himself. "We aren't going to waste time going back to find a measly old satchel," he growled somewhat more amicably.

"But—"

"No buts about it. Come on. You ate off me. Now you got to see me through," he snarled. His eyes roved along the street. "There's a doctor's sign over there. I'm going in and do my stuff and get that paper. You two bums—"

"Don't keep calling us bums," protested Bill irritably. "We are not bums."

"You two bums wait over in that drug store for me," continued Mickey, ignoring the motion for an amendment.

He pointed to a store on the corner—Pinky's Pharmacy, an easy name to remember. "And don't forget the two feeds I handed you."

Bill sighed meekly. Mickey certainly wasn't going to let us forget we were sewed up to him by a meal ticket.

MICKEY gave a tentative groan or two that sounded as though he was probing the depths of anguish, and headed for the doctor's sign, while Bill and I shuffled over to the drug store.

Bill looked back. The doctor's door had closed on Mickey.

"You wait here for me," Bill directed hurriedly. "I'm going to run over to the restaurant and get our satchel. I'll be back before Mickey comes out. We got to have our satchel and stock of Indian Oil, because from now on we're either going to get our meals honestly or we're going to starve. No more of this business of playing hide-and-seek with our consciences in the ornamental fringe of a cheap imitation of a crime ring."

I took up my stand outside Pinky's Pharmacy, while Bill sped toward the restaurant. He had only about two blocks to go, and I figured he could cover the ground while Mickey was draping wool over the doctor's eyes.

The minutes slowly passed. Bill did not return, nor did Mickey reappear. Quarter of an hour passed. What had happened to Bill? So far as Mickey was concerned, I didn't very much care what had become of him; but my old side-kick, Bill—that was a different matter.

The quarter of an hour lengthened into a half.

There came a sudden interruption. A bell clanged in the distance, and an ambulance came careening down the block. It stopped abruptly in front of the doctor's office, and the driver dexterously swung the rear end to the curb. A white-coated interne leaped out and scurried up the steps, carrying

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a black bag. The driver trailed after him with a stretcher.

I crossed the street to investigate. My first guess was that Mickey had blackjacked the doctor, perhaps in a fight over the signing of the certificate.

The doctor's door opened and the driver and interne emerged, the stretcher between them. I craned forward. On the stretcher lay Mickey. He seemed to be asleep.

In the open doorway above was a dignified-looking man—the doctor, I judged.

"What's the matter with Mickey?" I asked.

The doctor looked at me. "Is he a friend of yours?" he demanded with unusual interest.

"More or less," I hedged. "Hurt in an accident, was he?" I queried.

"Oh, no, nothing like that," said the doctor. "Judging by the symptoms and the pain, it absolutely must be a case of acute chronic appendicitis—no question about that. He put up a big argument, but I gave him a heavy hypodermic to ease the pain and am sending him over to the hospital. I'm afraid an immediate operation may be necessary."

Mickey had staged his act all too realistically and had selected the wrong symptoms!

The ambulance clanged away, and I crossed over to the drug store. Mickey probably deserved all he was getting, but how about Bill? What had become of him? I was worried.

I WAS standing there debating whether to start for the restaurant and take a chance of missing Bill on the way, when a clerk appeared in the doorway and beckoned to me. "Are you expecting a telephone call?" he asked.

"Not me," I replied.

The clerk seemed disappointed. "Some Bill Higgins is on the wire in there; he said a man would be standing outside this store expecting him, and he wanted—"

"That's me," I interrupted eagerly.

The clerk led the way inside and directed me to the telephone. Sure enough it was Bill's voice at the other end.

"Why didn't you come back?" I demanded.

"I couldn't," replied Bill laconically. "I'm detained over here at the restaurant." Then: "Has that dirty faker come out yet?"

I might not grade high on an intelligence test, but I'm good at guessing. My guess was that Bill was referring to Mickey.

"Yeh, he's out—carried out," I said. "He must have put on a good show—too darned good—but got his wires all crossed on the symptoms. Only a confession will save him from being pried open at the hospital. He's got a fat chance of collecting from the bus company. His game is shot. That lets us out. We certainly can't square the account now for the two dinners we ate."

"Who said we couldn't?" Bill interposed. "I've already started squaring it—at forty cents an hour—washing dishes and scrubbing floors. I can't get the satchel out of hock, or myself either, until the whole bill is squared. Come on over and help."

"Mickey paid for the dinners," I protested indignantly. "I saw him hand over two two-dollar bills."

"I saw him, too," said Bill. "Well, both the bills were phony."

THE END.

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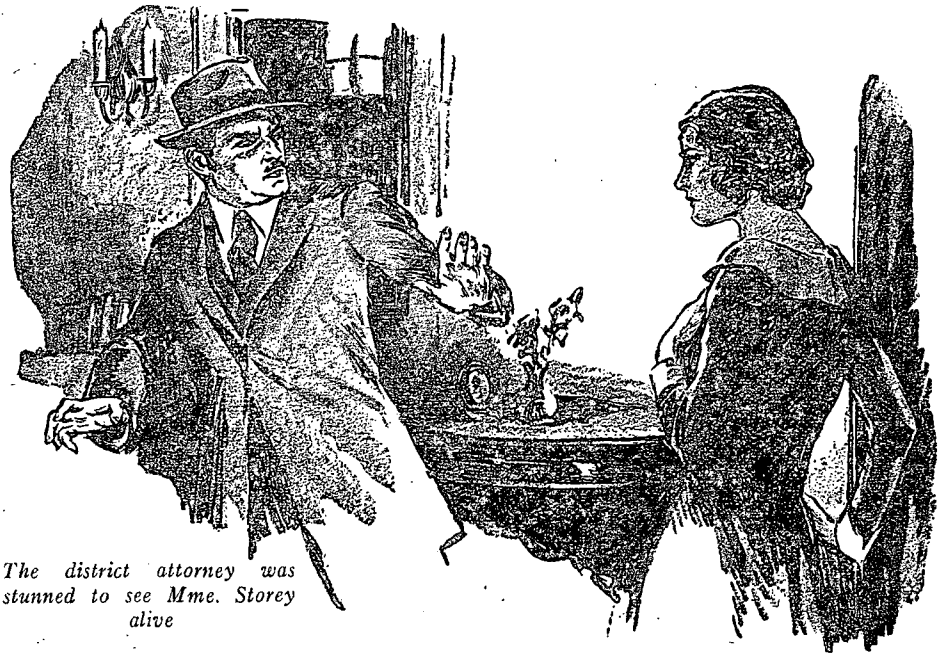

The district attorney was stunned to see Mme. Storey alive

Easy to Kill

Every resource of Mme. Storey, great detective though she was, had to be used in laying a pitfall for the infernally lucky millionaire-slayer, Nick Van Tassel

By HULBERT FOOTNER

Author of "The Death Notice," "The Butlers' Ball," etc.

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

PREYING on aged millionaires of Newport, a blackmailer known as the Leveller was extorting huge sums of money and making life a hell of fear for his victims. They knew only too well that those who would not pay were murdered—frightened to death, by some device they could only picture in their tortured minds.

At last the wife of one victim, Howard Van Tassel, found courage to send for one of the country's shrewdest detectives—Mme. Storey. But the Van Tassels refused to give the threatening letters full publicity, and shortly afterward old Howard Van Tassel died of acute terror. Mme. Storey was discharged, but decided to carry on the investigation herself. Her secretary Bella (who tells the story) was to help.

Mme. Storey's keen mind soon found the slayer—Nick Van Tassel, a young daredevil who spent a million a year and was the idol of the whole colony. Five friends worked with him:

This story began in the Argosy for August 8.

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Bill Kipp, Reggie Margatt, Ann Lewiston, Evelyn Surdam, Mary Burne. Nick continued to play the affable sportsman of Newport. His arrogant manner defied Mme. Storey to hang charges on him. He was too influential to be convicted anyhow, he believed.

Nick coolly invited the detective to stop at his farm, the Dump. Playing the part of a leisurely guest, Mme. Storey made several efforts to obtain evidence.

One of the Leveller's victims was the eighty-year-old dandy Gibbs Cumberland. When Mme. Storey proposed that he help trap the criminal, the cowardly old multimillionaire invented a charge against her, and had her thrown into jail. She then told the whole story to District Attorney Lyle—a petty, boot-licking politician. He opened the jail doors, but flatly refused to arrest Nick.

When another victim was due for murder, the district attorney again refused to hold Nick. The evidence was small. Mme. Storey had her men capture the slayer. In turn, Nick's friends entrapped Mme. Storey and her secretary, but they managed to escape with the aid of two young stick-up men, Pete and Joe, who picked them up on the road in a small car.

On the same night Mme. Storey's hotel burned, and the two women barely escaped from a room bolted on the outside. It was clear that Nick was thoroughly angry now—determined to kill his pursuer.

With the aid of young Pete and Joe, Mme. Storey disappeared. She let stories circulate that she had been burned to death. Actually, she was taking refuge with a spirited old recluse, Miss Betsy Pryer, vastly wealthy, but never seen about Newport. Heartily, the old woman agreed to lay a trap for Nick. Mme. Storey set about one of the most dangerous attempts of her career.

CHAPTER XX.

PLAYING WITH FIRE.

MISS BETSY called her house the Priory in a spirit of fun. Mme. Storey and I were installed on the third floor, which had not been used in many years. It was never visited by the servants, with the exception of cleaning women who came in at stated intervals. Since we had a suite over the closed guest rooms, nobody could hear our footfalls. Our doors were always locked, of course. There was very little chance that any one would find out we were still alive, until Mme. Storey was good and ready to spring her trap.

We were perfectly comfortable. The only drawback was the necessity of staying in all day. We gradually got in the habit of sleeping the greater part of the day, and staying up at night. This suited Miss Betsy to a T. Also at night we could get exercise out on the dark lawn.

Besides Catherine, the household consisted of a cook and three maids. Miss Betsy considered that butlers were nuisances. These four women slept in the kitchen wing, which was entirely distinct from our part of the house. All were elderly. Since Miss Betsy took her meals upstairs, they rarely saw her. There was also a man and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Baxter, who lived in a lodge by the gates. Baxter was a chauffeur, and his principal task was to take Catherine into town every day to do her shopping. Miss Betsy, herself, boasted that she had

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never been in a motor car. There were two gardeners who came by the day.

We became acquainted by degrees with the customs of that extraordinary household. The gates were kept locked at all times. When her husband was out with the car, Mrs. Baxter was forbidden to open the gates for any reason whatever. There was, however, an ancient telephone from the lodge to the house, so that she could transmit a message. There was no connection with the regular exchange. Miss Betsy's only visitor from the outside world was a certain Dr. Wickham, a very old man who had lost all his other patients, she said, because he told them the truth.

Catherine waited on us. A pale, subdued, enigmatic kind of woman, I was ill at ease with her at first. I discovered she was a treasure. She adored her queer mistress, and what was more, she understood Miss Betsy, and could appreciate her funny side. Once she learned that Mme. Storey and I also loved the grim old woman, she would have done anything for us. Catherine had no life apart from her mistress, and wanted no other.

Her greatest problem was to feed us without the knowledge of the other servants. She solved it cleverly. Among her other duties she was Miss Betsy's almoner; that is to say, she always had a dozen or more poor families on her list that she visited regularly. She carried a big wicker basket in the car, and had it filled at the grocer's. She carried it into each house she visited, and of course the chauffeur had no means of knowing if it was emptied when it came home. That was how our food entered the house.

She cooked it on an electric stove in our bathroom. Our bill of fare was somewhat restricted, but everything was delicious. Miss Betsy had a way of demanding food at all sorts of odd hours, so Catherine had had plenty of experience. She even smuggled a nursery ice-box up to our bathroom, and kept it stored with ice. Our principal meal was usually eaten in the middle of the night with Miss Betsy. The old lady was more fun than a barrel of monkeys. In repose she had one of the saddest faces I ever saw. Mme. Storey said the two things went together.

"Ah, what will I do after you are gone?" Miss Betsy would say.

"Come with us," said Mme. Storey. "You've been shut up long enough."

But she always shook her head. "I don't like to be stared at."

IN addition to the local sheet, Miss Betsy subscribed to a Boston and to a New York newspaper, so we were kept well advised of what was going on in the world. The sensation caused by the supposed tragic death of Mme. Storey rolled up to an immense height, and subsided. I was a little shocked to see how quickly she was crowded off the front page. Well, I suppose the President himself once he was dead, would no longer be news.

The fire chief reported that the Allardyce-Bowles fire had been caused by crossed wires. Same old gag. There was no official investigation. District Attorney Lyle laid low. After the first day Nick Van Tassel managed to keep out of the papers. Henry Eversley left Newport in a hastily chartered yacht, "for a voyage around the world."

Mme. Storey immediately got in touch with her lawyer in New York by means of a letter which Miss Betsy addressed in her immense angular hand. Through him a few people whom she could trust were informed of the real situation. But everything

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was allowed to take its course as if she were really dead. Her will was entered for probate, and our offices on Gramercy Park closed up.

She was somewhat scandalized to learn that some friends who were not in the secret were getting up a memorial service for her at the Little Church Around the Corner. There was nothing she could do to stop it. I wondered if Nick would attend the service. It would be like him.

Crider and the bunch were ordered back to New York, and we were soon in daily communication with him. He addressed his letters to Miss Betsy Pryer. We were then ready to start our new campaign.

"We must first get some publicity for you," said Mme. Storey to Miss Betsy. "I hope you don't mind."

"I can stand it if I don't have to perform in public," she said.

"Only one appearance will be necessary, and that not in public."

My employer prepared some press notices, all much to the same effect but differently worded. Like this:

It is not generally known that since the death of Hetty Green, the richest woman in America is Miss Betsy Pryer of Newport. Miss Pryer's income tax runs into millions. In Newport Miss Betsy is a legend; nobody has seen her for forty years except her servants. A few of the older residents remember her as a beautiful and brilliant girl who, in the full flush of her social triumphs, suddenly gave up everything and retired from the world.

She lives in a big house standing in extensive grounds on the shore of Brenton's Cove. Her place is surrounded by a nine-foot wall, topped by broken bottles. It is said that several fierce mastiffs are allowed to wander about at will inside. Night and day the gates are locked and guarded, and all communications must be made through the bars. There is no telephone.

Miss Betsy's only link with the world appears to be a faithful woman-servant whom the storekeepers know as Miss Catherine. Every morning precisely at nine the gates swing open and a car appears bearing Miss Catherine to do her marketing. This severe, middle-aged woman is about as communicative regarding her mistress's affairs as the proverbial clam. As for the chauffeur, he only turns his head away with a scowl when he is asked a question.

Yet Miss Betsy occasionally gives a sign of life from behind her well-guarded walls. It appears that she is a faithful reader of the newspapers. Every now and then she is displeased by some modern manifestation in the news on which occasion she writes a peppery letter to the local paper. Her fears include telephones, motor cars, phonographs, radios, airplanes—pretty much everything that has come in since 1890.

So far as is known, Miss Betsy has not a relative in the world, and there is much speculation as to the disposal of her vast fortune when she passes on. She is over seventy years old.

Miss Betsy did not care much for this piece.

"Hum! Ha!" she snorted. "Beautiful! Brilliant! Pah! Are you making game of me?"

"That's what they expect you to say," Mme. Storey pointed out. "It must sound like the usual tripe."

"Well, you know best," she said with an impatient shrug. "Send it out!"

THREE notices were sent to an important press bureau with instructions that they be sent to three papers only. To have covered the whole country simultaneously might have aroused suspicion. Mme. Storey counted on other papers copying it, one from another.

And so it happened. Within a few

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days the story, now considerably garbled, trickled into the columns of a Newport newspaper. The editor added a little piece pointing out some of the obvious inaccuracies. This was exactly what we wanted.

"Richest woman in America," of course, was news everywhere, and, once started, there was no stopping the story. It was like an endless chain. I think every newspaper from Panama to Alaska must have printed it eventually. As a result Miss Betsy's modest mail grew to such proportions that it had to be carried up from the lodge in a bushel basket. All these letters offered her suggestions for getting rid of her money.

Mme. Storey proposed that Miss Betsy write to the local newspaper about the matter. The old lady needed no help in composing this letter.

SIR:

Some idle-minded fool has done me the doubtful honor of writing a piece about me and sending it to the newspapers. Apparently, since the original author remains anonymous, I have no recourse. It is outrageous that a law-abiding citizen should be forced to submit to such an annoyance. I am not the richest woman in America, nor does my annual income tax run into the millions. Neither are there any fierce mastiffs at large in my grounds. If I choose to live in seclusion that is my affair.

It seems that this story is being copied from paper to paper all over the country. It is a sad commentary on the quality of the mental pabulum that is required by our people. As a result I am being annoyed by hundreds of begging letters daily. I wish to advertise the fact that I don't propose to read these letters, much less answer them. I hope that my letter may be copied as widely as the original story, so that a lot of foolish people may be saved from wasting their time. I might also say, in case the label "richest woman in America" has attracted the attention of the light-fingered gentry, that I possess no jewelry, and never keep money in the house.

Yours very truly,
BETSY PRYER.

I do not know how widely this sprightly communication may have been copied throughout the country, but it had not the slightest effect on the begging letters. They continued to arrive by the bushel.

We paid very little attention to the letters. What Mme. Storey was angling for was interviewers. Night after night the old lady was coached for this ordeal. She entered into the game with spirit. We had a good deal of fun out of it. But it was true Miss Betsy was the world's worst actress, and Mme. Storey finally had to abandon the idea of exhibiting her to the newspaper reporters.

The reporters came, of course, and like good reporters they refused to take no for an answer. Half a dozen times a day one of the Baxters telephoned from the lodge to the house to say that a man or a woman was hanging around the gates. They dogged Catherine's footsteps when she went into town. When they were balked they often went away and wrote spiteful stories about Miss Betsy. Finally one of the New York tabloids suggested there was a sinister mystery in the case. The inference was that "the tight-lipped woman"—so they termed poor Catherine—had secretly made away with Miss Betsy and was devoting her mistress's home and her income to her own purposes.

At this point Mme. Storey decided to take the old family doctor into her confidence. Miss Betsy assured us he was as honest and faithful as the day. When he next came to the house Cath-

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erine brought him up to our third floor sitting room. A gruff and hairy old man, with a spotty waistcoat and eyes as gentle as a big dog's. If he was astonished to discover that Miss Betsy had two lodgers, he carefully concealed it.

As a result of his conference with my employer he sent the following letter to the tabloid newspaper:

DEAR SIR:

Miss Betsy Pryer has been a patient of mine ever since I started to practice, forty-three years ago. All the unsought publicity which has been raging in the press during the last few days is very distasteful to my patient, and the story which appeared in your columns yesterday seems to cap the climax. It does a serious wrong to an old and faithful servant.

Therefore I wish to assert as positively as I can for the benefit of you and your readers that Miss Pryer is very much alive. While she is not a well woman—she has been suffering for several years from a dropsical complaint, due to a serious heart condition that confines her to her room—there is no reason, with the wonderful care she receives, why she should not live for many years to come. But the nervousness induced by these stories is very bad for her, and of course anything in the nature of a shock might terminate fatally.

I am therefore writing to ask you to give this letter as wide publicity as possible, so that these ridiculous stories may cease and be forgotten. All that my patient desires is to be let alone.

Yours very truly,
JARED WICKHAM, M.D.

Miss Betsy enjoyed a good laugh over this letter.

"That's our bait," said Mme. Storey. "We must sit back now and wait for a nibble."

"In what form do you expect to get a nibble?" asked Miss Betsy.

"The first thing our adversary must do is to inform himself of the real situation inside this house. He can only get that through Catherine. Either he or one of his agents will be making up to her shortly."

Catherine was in the room at the time.

"Hm! Too bad she isn't a more promising subject for that sort of thing," said Miss Betsy, looking her over. "Maybe we ought to have put in somebody in her place."

"Not at all," said Mme. Storey. "Catherine is the best possible subject. She is known to all Newport. She is above suspicion."

"Let's warn her of what's in store," said Miss Betsy with a wicked twinkle. "Catherine, my girl, has any young man been trying to flirt with you lately? I don't mean reporters."

"No, indeed!" answered Catherine with a toss of her head that suggested a young man had better not try it.

"Well, you may expect it any time now."

"At my age!" said Catherine, scandalized.

"You are not too old," put in Mme. Storey, smiling. "Our antagonist is a good psychologist, and he knows you are not too old. He knows, too, that when a woman of your age falls for a man she falls very hard indeed. In fact she can refuse him nothing . . . In the beginning you should repulse him if you choose, but after that you can appear to let yourself go without danger."

"I'll do my best," said Catherine, demurely casting down her eyes.

"Do your best!" said Miss Betsy with affectionate scorn. "Listen at the woman! I only wish it was me. What a chance! I'd give him a run for his money!"

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It is possible that Catherine in her quiet way had the same idea.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE TRAP IS SET.

FOR a few days nothing happened. Meanwhile the storm of publicity blowing around Miss Betsy's head ceased as suddenly as it had arisen. When they found it impossible to secure a photograph of her, the interest of the tabloids quickly waned. The life of a tabloid depends upon finding something new for its readers every day. Miss Betsy was forgotten by all the world, apparently—or all but one!

It was on a Monday morning, I remember, that Catherine, upon her return from her daily shopping expedition, came up to the third floor and aroused us. She was in a state of considerable agitation for her; a bright red spot burned in the middle of each pale cheek, and her eyes showed an unnatural glitter. This was the story she told us:

"This was my day for calling on Si Evans's family. He's the watchman who broke his hip six weeks ago and hasn't been able to work since. The eldest daughter has tuberculosis. They live in a poor house on Charles Street. Every week I take them jelly and soup from Miss Betsy, and make sure they have enough to go on with.

"To-day when I went in, there was a young man in the dining room. Bob Dewar by name. They were all very friendly to him and grateful because he had bought a paper route for Johnny, the youngest boy, so Johnny could go back to school when it opens and still be earning something.

"The young man never said anything to me while I was in the house, but he kept looking at me funny." Catherine averted her head. "I suppose it's the way a man does look at a woman, but I never realized it before. It was very—disturbing. He was a handsome young man.

"He left when I did, and as soon as we got outside the door he started speaking: 'When can I see you again?' You could have knocked me down with a feather! I didn't know what to say. I didn't say anything!"

"He was what they call a fast worker," said Mme. Storey.

"Yes'm. He said: 'Can't you see I'm just crazy about you? I've been following you about. I only made friends with Johnny Evans so I could get acquainted with you. I must know you!' All this while standing in the walk in front of the Evans house, with Baxter at the wheel of the car not twenty feet away.

"I finally managed to get out: 'What are you trying to do, make a fool of me? At my age?' 'No! No!' he said. 'Look at me, and you'll see that I mean every word! You're not old to me. What do I care how old you are? There's something about you—I can't explain it. All I know is, you're the only one for me. When can I see you again?'

"I was so flustered I didn't know what to say. 'Don't you ever get a night out?' he asked. 'I never go out at night,' I said, 'but I could go any time I wanted.' 'Then come into town to-night and go to the movies with me,' he begged. 'It's almost dark in there, and we can talk low. Meet me inside the Strand picture house at eight o'clock. I'll be waiting for you inside where it's dark and we can sit down together.'

"At first I said I wouldn't. 'Please come! Please come!' he begged. 'I

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swear I mean you no harm. Just want to make friends. I must know you! Please come!' So"—Catherine turned away her head again—"after a while I said I would—hoping I did right."

"Why, of course!" said Mme. Storey. "Everything is going splendidly! What does this young man look like?"

"He's very good-looking," said Catherine self-consciously. "I couldn't quite make out if he was a real gentleman. He talked like one, but his clothes were too loud. He had big brown eyes, big as a woman's, and full red lips. His face was smooth all over. His voice was soft."

Mme. Storey and I looked at each other. Reggie Margatt!

"Are you sure it's the one you think?" Catherine asked wistfully. The poor soul was hoping against hope that she had made a genuine conquest.

"Absolutely," said Mme. Storey. "We know him."

"There might be some mistake."

"Listen! Doesn't he talk like this?" In an imitation of Reggie's flat, reedy voice, she said: "There's something about you! I can't explain it!"

Catherine's head dropped lower. "That's him," she murmured. "Oh, what blackguards men are!" she went on, low-voiced. "He looked at me in such a way, and spoke so soft and full of feeling, I was sure he meant it!"

"Why, of course!" said Mme. Storey crisply. "That's what men have been doing since the beginning... But as long as you know where you stand, it's all right, isn't it? You can go on with it just as if it was an amusing game, deceiving the deceiver!"

Catherine jerked her head up. "Sure, I can go on with it," she said with a hard smile. "I'll dress up for him to-night."

We did not learn in detail all that occurred at the movies, for Catherine was reticent. But it was evident that they had made a long stride toward intimacy.

"I am learning more about men than I ever knew in all my life before," she said with compressed lips.

HE begged her to come into town the following night, but she said it would look too funny after being such a home body, for her to start going out every night. He then asked her if it was true that there were dogs at large in the grounds, and when she said no, he offered to come in a boat at nine that night, and meet her outside.

She was waiting for him at the edge of the rocks. She told us he came in a small varnished boat that looked like a yacht dinghy. The name of the yacht was painted on the back of the stern seat, but something had been smeared over it, and she could not read it. They spent a couple of hours wandering around the grounds together.

After he had gone Catherine reported to Mme. Storey. Without appearing to betray undue curiosity, Bob (or Reggie) had asked many questions about the layout of the house and the routine of the household, she said. She, of course, had taken pains to fill in the outline sketched in Dr. Wickham's letter. She represented her mistress as a sick and nervous old woman, just able to hobble from her bed to a chair and back. At all costs Miss Betsy must be saved from a shock, she had told him. And also that she and her mistress were alone in the main part of the house after nightfall.

"He's coming back to-morrow night," Catherine said, lowering her eyes.

"Bring him into the house," sug-

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gested Mme. Storey. "Tell him you're obliged to remain within hearing of your mistress's bell in case she wants anything."

On this occasion Catherine showed him all over the main house excepting only Miss Betsy's bedroom and the third floor. No doubt he had used his eyes to good advantage. They entered and left the house by way of the conservatory which opened off the rear of the main hall, and had a door into the garden.

After the first meeting Catherine was chary of repeating the details of her young man's love-making, except in so far as it concerned Mme. Storey's plan. Well, we did not blame her. It was a strange experience for the elderly ladies' maid. It made her cynical, yet I think she enjoyed it on the whole. We never could be sure how she felt. But there was no doubt she found it tremendously exciting.

After another visit, the young man began to talk guardedly of the possibility of marriage. The only thing in the way of it was a lack of money, it seemed. From that it was only a step to suggesting ever so delicately, that if they could only find some way of relieving Miss Betsy of a little of her surplus, she would never miss it, and it would set them up for life.

"And what did you say to that?" Mme. Storey asked Catherine.

"I didn't say much," murmured Catherine, "but I let him see that I didn't mind if some way could be found without mixing me up in it. He said I needn't have anything to do with it."

"And is he going ahead with it?"

Catherine nodded. "He thinks I'm completely gone on him."

"It's never hard to persuade a man of that," said Mme. Storey.

On the second morning following, the plot came to a head. Upon entering her sitting room, Miss Betsy found an envelope addressed to herself propped up on her writing desk.

Without opening it, she sent it up to Mme. Storey by Catherine. The plain white envelope, the sheet of typewriter paper within, covered with a few lines of type-script—it was only too familiar to us. The only change was, in this letter the signature was typed in red. Evidently the writer had a new machine.

MISS BETSY PRYER:

My job is to collect from those who have too much money, and put it where it will do good. I have you down on my list. I want twenty-five thousand dollars from you. I'll give you two days to get the cash in the house, then I'll send word how to pass it on.

If you attempt to stall me off or to communicate with the police you will see me in person. I will be the last thing your eyes will see on earth. No locks or guards can keep me from you. See how easy it is for me to put this letter on your table. I have my own way of working. Every member of your household is watched. Kip Havemeyer and Howard Van Tassel each received a visit from me. They both had magnificent funerals.

You are an old woman and a sick one. If you wish to spend your remaining days with a quiet mind, heed this letter. Remember, old women are easy to kill.

THE LEVELLER.

When my employer read out the curt sentences I seemed to feel the dark presence of Nick Van Tassel there in the room.

AFTER making sure that the servants would be occupied elsewhere, Mme. Storey and I went down to Miss Betsy's sitting room to consult with her. The sturdy old woman chuckled when she heard the con-

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tents of the letter. How I envied her unconcern!

"Ha!" she cried; "this time he's got a pig-nut between his teeth when he thinks it's an almond!" She brandished the big stick. "I only hope I may get one good crack at him, that's all!"

Mme. Storey shook her head gravely. "What good will that do you if he has a gun? However carefully we plan, there will be a serious danger. A gun can be fired so quickly!"

"And I will make a pretty good mark, eh?" Miss Betsy's chair creaked warningly when she laughed. "Never mind. I'll chance it."

"I'll make it my job to disarm him," said Mme. Storey.

"What must I do about this?" asked Miss Betsy, shaking the letter. "I suppose I'll have to wait two days before I can hurl my defiance at him."

"No," said Mme. Storey. "Answer it at once; publicly."

"Publicly?"

"Write to the newspaper in your usual peppery style."

"Why?"

"To force the issue. Such a letter from you in the newspaper would put heart into all his other victims. He would have to strike at you instantly to keep them in line."

"But if he did for me, wouldn't that stop his game anyhow? I mean if a letter from me had been published."

"Not if he shocked you to death. There would be no mark on you; no evidence of murder. Your death would be ascribed to heart disease."

"By George!" said Miss Betsy. "It's almost a shame to stop such a clever racket!"

With my employer's help, she evolved the following letter to the editor of a Newport morning paper. Their principal care was not to say too much in it.

SIR:

As a result of the unsought and uncalled-for attention lately devoted to my humble self in the columns of your newspaper, along with others, I am still being pestered by hundreds of letters daily from all the cranks and fools in Christendom. To-day I have a letter signed by some one who calls himself "The Leveller" demanding twenty-five thousand dollars in cash from me, under threat of death or injury.

I shall pay no attention to it, of course. It is obviously the work of either a practical joker or a madman. If his eye falls on this, let him learn that his letter already reposes in my waste paper basket. I am writing this to call your attention, sir, to the endless annoyance—not to use a stronger word—which may result from the injudicious advertising you have given my name; and to express a hope that you will not subject me to any more of it in the future.

Yours very truly,

BETSY PRYER.

The letter was sealed and addressed, and Catherine sent for.

"If this brings him," I said nervously, "there's only one man on the place, and all us women."

"I'll provide for that," said Mme. Storey. "I don't mean to take any chances." She weighed the envelope thoughtfully in her hand. "The question is, will the publication of this letter stir the district attorney into taking action? He knows that the Leveller is not making an idle threat. Surely, if there is a spark of decency in the man he will warn Miss Betsy of what she's up against."

"He took no action after the fire," I pointed out. "It may be dangerous for him to let anything come out now."

"You are right," she said. "I must prod him into action."

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She addressed the maid. "Catherine, take this letter to the newspaper office, and make sure that it will be published in to-morrow's issue. Afterward you are to go to a telephone booth and call up District Attorney Lyle in Providence. Ask him in Miss Betsy's name to come call on her to-morrow morning at eleven on a matter of urgent importance.

"When he asks the nature of the business, tell him to read the Newport paper to-morrow and he will understand. Tell him to bring the Newport chief of police with him if he thinks it desirable, and impress upon him the importance of saying nothing about his errand until after he has talked with your mistress."

"What! The district attorney, the chief of police—won't all this publicity spoil our show?" asked Miss Betsy.

"Wait!" said Mme. Storey with a smile.

She made Catherine repeat her instructions after her.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE TRAP IS SPRUNG.

MISS BETSY'S letter to the newspaper was published on the following morning.

Dr. Wickham made an early call, and through him we got in touch with the Westervelts, a family who had leased the adjoining place on Brenton's Cove. Mr. Westervelt had an express cruiser lying at his pier. Mme. Storey considered that it might come in useful later.

When Catherine returned from her shopping trip, she reported that her young man had approached her outside one of the stores. This instantly suggested there was something important in the wind. Well, we already knew our antagonist believed in striking swiftly.

Bob told Catherine he had been engaged as an entertainer at a smoking concert that night, and he wouldn't be able to meet her until eleven-thirty. If she would wait for him down at the edge of the rocks he said, they could go for a row.

This was obviously a ruse to get Catherine off the place while the chief paid his visit, and we therefore made all preparations to receive him that night. He knew, of course, that when Catherine went out of the house at night she left the conservatory door unlocked behind her.

At eleven Lyle and the chief of police duly presented themselves at Miss Betsy's gates. Mrs. Baxter had her orders, and they were refused admittance. One can picture their astonishment and indignation. There was quite a scene. Finally as a great concession, Mrs. Baxter admitted them to the lodge, and allowed Lyle to talk to the house over the private phone.

The instrument was in Miss Betsy's sitting room. We were all there waiting for the call. Mme. Storey answered it, speaking in the cracked and querulous voice of age. A wonderful piece of mimicry. How thunderstruck Mr. Lyle would have been, had he been suddenly gifted with the power to see whom he was talking to! The real Miss Betsy listened to the conversation with a broad smile.

"Yes, this is Miss Pryer . . . No, I can't see you. I am too sick and nervous this morning. My doctor has forbidden it."

He reminded her that she had sent for him, and that he had driven all the way from Providence in answer to her summons.

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"Yes, I know," she said pettishly. "But I'm too sick to see you. And anyway I've changed my mind. I'm not going to do anything about the threatening letter I received. It is obviously a hoax."

Lyle said that she was very likely right, but just the same all proper precautions ought to be taken.

"No!" said the pretended Miss Betsy. "I'm not going to bother about it. I should feel like a fool."

When she continued to resist him, he was forced to change his tone.

"There may be a real danger in this," he said. "I have heard rumors that there was something like this going on."

So there was a spark of decency in the man, though it was buried deep!

"What do you want to do?" she asked.

"If there is such a man, it is my duty to catch him."

"Well, what do you want me to do?"

"Nothing, except to allow us to furnish you with adequate protection."

"If there is anybody, you'll never catch him that way," she retorted. "If he's got any sense at all he is certainly having me watched. And you too. And if you fill up my place with police and detectives he'll simply stay away until you take them out again. You can't keep them here indefinitely. As soon as they're gone he'll strike at me."

LYLE could find no answer to this piece of obvious common sense except to say helplessly:

"But you must be protected, Miss Pryer."

"Fudge!" she said in Miss Betsy's impatient manner. "If you want to catch the man, you've got to advertise that you're not trying to catch him."

"How can I do that, madam?" he demanded with asperity.

"Listen. Let you and the chief of police give out interviews to the press. Make sure they are going to be printed in the afternoon papers. Say that as soon as you read my letter in this morning's paper you hastened to my place to devote all the resources of the district attorney's office and the police force to my protection. That will sound well.

"Say that I refused your offers. You can ascribe it to my sickness, my nervous condition, or anything you like. But make it strong. Say that I refused to permit a single detective or policeman to enter my grounds, and that consequently your hands are tied. The chief of police might add that he intends to have the roads in the vicinity of my place well patrolled anyhow."

"Why put that in?" he asked.

"Well, it sounds good," said the make-believe Miss Betsy, winking at the real one. "And if anybody has the notion of attacking me, it may persuade him to come by water. It would be easier to catch him, wouldn't it, if he tried to escape by water? I am told that the result of an automobile chase is always doubtful."

Lyle admitted this was so.

"After you have talked to the reporters, I suggest that you return to your office in Providence and work there all afternoon as usual. To-night I will send up Mr. Westervelt's yacht to fetch you down here. The captain will telephone your residence when he arrives. Say about eight o'clock.

"Whenever he comes up from New York to visit his family Mr. Westervelt uses this boat to carry him from Providence to Brenton's Cove. Consequently its appearance will cause no comment, whoever may be watching.

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Bring your special officers with you. I suggest that two will be enough. Land at Mr. Westervelt's pier, and I will have you brought secretly to my house."

"To-night?" faltered Lyle.

"Well, I'm not going to guarantee that it isn't a wild-goose chase. You insisted on it. If anybody is going to attack me, he will probably do it quickly for the sake of the moral effect."

"You are right, Miss Pryer."

It doubtless went very much against the grain with Lyle to accept a plan of action from an eccentric old woman who was supposed to be almost bedridden to boot, but as he could suggest nothing better, he had no choice. The fact that Miss Betsy was called the richest woman in the world probably helped to sugar the pill.

"Very well, Miss Pryer, I will be expecting a call about eight."

Thus Mme. Storey's simple plan was laid, and there was nothing further to do but wait for night to come.

WE had to take Baxter into our confidence because we needed his assistance, but none of the women in the house were told what we expected. This Baxter was an innocent sort of fool who looked very smart in his chauffeur's uniform and sported a big turned-up mustache in the hope that people would think he was a foreigner. But he was faithful enough, poor fellow, and strong as an ox.

He was set to work that afternoon in the privacy of his own workshop, making a flexible ladder that could be thrown over the wall later for the district attorney. Afterward Baxter laid a wire from the door of the conservatory through the house and up to Miss Betsy's bedroom, where it was furnished with a tiny buzzer. This was to warn us of our man's coming.

I think that was the hardest day I have ever had to put in. Nick Van Tassel had fooled us so many times; had always displayed such a devilish resourcefulness in a tight place, that I couldn't persuade myself we had a chance of catching him. It came back to me that there was something superhuman in the man. This was one of those feelings you can't reason with.

Mme. Storey slept calmly for hours during the day, but I never closed my eyes. That remarkable woman, Miss Betsy, looked forward with dancing eyes to what she termed "the fun." She refused point-blank to leave her room during the time the visitor might be expected.

"But consider," said Mme. Storey gravely, "when he visits his other victims it's all one with him whether they pass out with fear or not; he turns it to advantage either way. With you the case is different; he's got to kill you because you have publicly defied him. A man as clever as he is isn't leaving anything to chance. Believe me, in case he fails to shock you to death, he has some other expedient in reserve. And we don't know what it is. It is too dangerous for you to remain in the room."

"You're going to be here, aren't you?" said Miss Betsy. "I'll take my chance." And nothing would budge her.

Dr. Wickham acted as go-between with the people next door. It proved not to be necessary to take Mrs. Westervelt into our confidence. The doctor used the name of another patient, a Mr. Pembroke, who lived in the neighborhood. He told Mrs. Westervelt that Mr. Pembroke's condition had taken a turn for the worse, and that he wished

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to call other doctors in consultation. He hired the yacht in Mr. Pembroke's name to bring the doctors down from Providence, and furnished the captain with the number he was to call when he went for them.

He further requested that captain and engineer sleep aboard that night in case the doctors had to return. Thus the yacht was available for purposes of pursuit, should we need it.

From an upstairs window in Miss Betsy's house I saw the cruiser nosing slowly out of the cove shortly before seven. Outside she shot away at full speed. They said she could do thirty-five miles an hour or better. We expected her back soon after nine.

SHE was. Baxter brought Lyle and his two men through the patch of woods that separated the two estates and over the formidable wall. The ladder was rolled up and hidden under a bush.

Mme. Storey and I were not present when Lyle was introduced to Miss Betsy. She told us about it later. When Lyle saw her planted in her chair with her big stick beside her, massive and composed, his jaw must have dropped almost to his chest. All the court room swagger went out of him.

"But I thought—I thought—" he stammered.

She finished his sentence for him. "You thought I was a frail wisp that was done with everything but the undertaker!" She shook with laughter, and the chair creaked under the strain.

The sound of the vigorous bass voice completed his demoralization. "There must be some mistake," he said feebly. "Over the phone—

"That was just part of my little game to catch this scoundrel," said Miss Betsy airily. "I understand that his specialty lies in shocking old folks to death. I merely wanted to persuade him that I was a good subject."

"How did you learn so much about his methods?" he asked, staring.

"I will explain that presently."

"Then your pretense that you weren't going to take any action was just—"

"Just a hoax, Mr. District Attorney. Or, as they say nowadays, a stall."

When Mme. Storey and I entered the sitting room, Lyle turned as white as a sheet, and clutched the back of a chair for support.

"I think you are acquainted with Mme. Storey and Miss Brickley," said the old lady wickedly.

The eyes of the two detectives bolted wildly. Lyle was unable to get out a single word.

"I am not a Phœnix risen from the ashes," said Mme. Storey, smiling. "I never was burned up."

Lyle was obliged to sit in the chair, and to wipe the cold sweat off his face. The hardy old lady did not spare him.

"Aren't you glad they escaped?"

"Of course! Of course!" he stammered. "But this is such a shock . . . I don't understand it . . ."

"Perhaps you suspect there is a very ugly story behind the burning of the Allardyce-Bowles."

"No!" he cried wildly. "I made a private investigation. There was no evidence! Not a shred!"

"To the devil with your evidence!" said Miss Betsy, pounding her stick. "You know perfectly well that Nick Van Tassel tried to burn them up!"

"What reason have you for saying such a thing?"

"It is very simple," put in Mme. Storey, mildly. "He chased us into the hotel. An hour later the fire broke out. When Miss Brickley and I tried

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to escape from our room, we found that the door had been fastened on the outside with an iron bar."

"Oh, my God!" cried Lyle. "Why didn't you come to me? Why didn't you tell me? I would instantly have started proceedings."

"I thought we'd stand a better chance of getting him this way," said Mme. Storey dryly. "You told me, you remember, that it would be useless to proceed against him unless we caught him in the act. Perhaps we will to-night."

During the rest of the night Mr. District Attorney was very subdued.

AT eleven Catherine went out to keep her date. All the lights in the house had been out for some time. Our final dispositions were quickly made. Baxter was hidden behind the ferns in the conservatory with an electric button in his hand. With this he was to signal us when our man entered the conservatory. The buzzer at the other end of the wire was in Mme. Storey's hand.

Since Miss Betsy insisted on remaining in the room, her chair was put in one of the front corners, and a screen placed around it. She said she was going to push the screen over with her stick when the fun began. She swore she could breathe as softly and quietly as a bird.

Mme. Storey was to stand just inside the door from the hall by which he would enter. A projection of the wall concealed her, should he cast a light inside before entering. She was armed with the same big revolver we had taken from Nick. Just beyond her was the foot of Miss Betsy's immense four-poster. With pillows we had arranged the semblance of a human body under the covers, a small pillow covered with a boudoir cap sticking out at the top.

I was to crouch at the head of the bed in such a position that by straightening up I could press the light switch when the man was fairly inside the room. One of the detectives was to stand behind the door from the hall, ready to seize him, while Lyle and the other man were to wait just inside the sitting-room door. This door was to be left open.

There was a long wait. Each separate nerve of my body seemed to be stretched like a violin string to the point of breaking. An agonizing feeling. Nobody was allowed to smoke, of course. Miss Betsy passed the time in ragging the district attorney in her rumbling whisper. She was a terrible old woman when she took a dislike to you.

No sound came through the open windows. We supposed that when our man entered the house, he would have his outposts stationed in the grounds. It was a clear, cool night with a gentle breeze stirring; a young moon preparing to set. I smelled honeysuckle somewhere.

Our man seemed to have a superstitious feeling for the hour of midnight.

We heard it now, striking in a distant church tower, a lovely sound. Immediately afterward there was a click in Mme. Storey's hand. She dropped the little buzzer on the rug, and kicked it out of her way. I thought, clenching my hands: If I can live through the next two minutes I'll be all right. Lyle and the other man retreated silently into the sitting room.

The door from the hall opened. Peeping under the high bedstead I saw it open; I saw his legs. He didn't make even the whisper of a sound. He used

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no light. There was still a dim suggestion of moonlight in the room.

When I understood he was carrying no flash, I ventured to peep over the top of the bed. Oh, God! What an apparition! All the blood in my veins turned to ice. I understood at that moment what it feels like to die of fright.

Yet it was a mere theatrical trick; some luminous substance like phosphorus smeared on his mask and on his false beard; on his hands. A spectral masked face and a pair of pale hands, one holding a gun. But this was not what frightened me most. Alongside where his body ought to have been, floated a large globe or bubble faintly shining from within. It lazily rose and fell; swayed from side to side. It was too horrible. My voice froze in my throat.

He kicked the door shut behind him, and turning to the bed said in a voice more awful than anything I ever dreamed:

"Wake up, old woman!"

I went completely daft then. They tell me I shrieked like mad. However, I automatically pressed the switch.

THINGS happened much quicker than I can tell about them. When the lights came up Mme. Storey, holding her pistol by the barrel, cracked him over the wrist, and his gun clattered to the floor. She kicked it across the room. With her left hand she snatched the mask off; the beard came with it, and for a second we all saw Nick Van Tassel at bay; snarling lips rolled back, eyes darting. The thing tied to his waist was nothing but a child's balloon, only bigger. A child's balloon!

He exploded the balloon and great billows of smoke filled the room.

"Gas!" screamed Mme. Storey. "Don't breathe!"

I instinctively dropped to the floor. Under the smoke I could see legs; Nick's legs. He ran to the window and dived out head-first, carrying the screen with him. I heard him roll down the porch roof and thud to the ground. He could not have been hurt, for instantly a shrill whistle pierced the night.

I saw Mme. Storey making her way toward the corner where Miss Betsy sat. Our first duty was toward the old woman, of course, and I followed. The screen was down. Somehow, we got the unwieldy body to its feet, and ran her into the next room, holding our breaths. We slammed the door behind us. The others were in there. As we dropped Miss Betsy into a chair, panting, she actually laughed.

"This is better than I expected!" she said.

Outside on the lawn we heard running feet followed by the sounds of a struggle. There was a shot and a fall; a long-drawn groan. This was from Baxter. Then some one running away.

"Come on!" cried Mme. Storey.

The gas was confined to the bedroom. We left Miss Betsy by the open window of the sitting room, and tearing down the main stairway of the house, banged open the front door. Filled with the madness of pursuit, I felt no fear then. Only a sickening rage because he had escaped us. We left Miss Betsy rocking her arms and groaning: "If I only had my legs! If I only had my legs!"

The two detectives set off pell-mell across the lawn toward the rocks, but Mme. Storey caught hold of Lyle.

"The speed boat is our best chance of catching him," she cried. "Show me where the ladder was left!"

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Two or three minutes later we ran out on the Westervelt pier and, springing aboard the motor yacht, banged on the doors to awaken the skipper and the engineer. They must have been astonished at our violence. Mme. Storey briefly explained that Miss Betsy's house had been entered, and the engineer leaped to his engine. There were only the two men sleeping aboard.

During the brief moment of silence that elapsed before the engine started we heard the sound of frantic oars near by, and could just make out a dim shape lying outside the cove. When our engine started, the generator started with it, and the searchlight came on. We picked up the craft outside, a smart motor cruiser not unlike our own. Four or five people were climbing over her side from a dinghy.

We had to back out from the pier and make a quarter turn. Before this was completed the other boat was gone. They left the dinghy drifting. There was a second dinghy floating in the cove. I wondered if Catherine were all right. When we got outside the cove we picked up the other cruiser with our searchlight. She was scooting north for the open bay. Running without lights, of course.

She rounded Fort Adams and disappeared. In a moment or two we followed, and picked her up again. It was now evident she was heading out to sea. The three of us were with the captain on a sort of little bridge amidships, behind a windshield. Mme. Storey and I had been given slickers. We were boiling along through the dark sea at express train speed, yet we did not seem to gain a foot on the flying craft ahead. Below us, the engineer's body stuck far out of his little door. He was likewise watching the boat ahead.

"It must be the Bonito, Nick Van Tassel's cruiser," muttered the captain. "Nothing else of her build has the speed. I reckon she was stolen."

Mme. Storey said nothing.

A chase at sea is an exasperating experience. There is nothing to do but sit still. You cannot help any. Your eyes are glued on the boat ahead, and its position never changes. The two boats are like fixed points with the sea roaring by. We left the land behind us and began to feel the long, slow Atlantic surges.

"Where the devil does he think he's going?" muttered the captain. "There is nothing in front of us short of the West Indies."

At last it became evident that we were drawing up on the Bonito—very slowly, to be sure, but nevertheless drawing up. We could see her plainly with our searchlight now. Mme. Storey's face was stony. She hardly dared hope.

I said rashly: "We've got him hard and fast, whether we overtake him or not. When you unmasked him to-night there were six witnesses. A man like Nick Van Tassel can't escape for long."

"We shall never lay hands on him," she said with grim certainty, to my wonder.

IT happened so swiftly that it stupefied me. The vessel ahead seemed to waver in her course, and for a second we saw her whole length dimly. I don't suppose it is given to many people to be actually looking at such a thing when it happens.

She lifted up in the middle and broke in half as easily as one might break a bread stick between one's fingers. A vast burst of flame filled the heavens, followed by an appalling smash. In-

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stantly the sea all round her seemed to be covered with fire.

I was stunned. The cries of my companions seemed to come from far off. My first sensation was of blinding pain. I understood the purport of Mme. Storey's grave words then. Of course Nick was not one who would let himself be taken alive! He must have had the alternative in view from the beginning. Lucifer, gone to his death with his lips fixed in that infernal smile!

I wondered if his companions had been bold enough to face it out, too, or if he had dragged them willy-nilly into eternity. One would never know. My heart bled at the thought of the three exquisite girls. What good had their beauty been to any one? Especially the delicious Evelyn, betrayed by love.

We had to stop our engines until the spreading gasoline on the sea burned itself out. In the middle of the fiery circle the two halves of the yacht blazed separately. The long swell from the open sea indifferently raised and lowered them. The madly leaping, curling, entangling flames were like fiery hair blown in the wind. At no time did we see anything human in the fire or in the sea. They must have tied weights to their bodies so they would sink at once. Very likely they had jumped overboard before the explosion.

It was all over in a few minutes. Each part of the vessel slowly sank, disappearing suddenly at the last with an expiring hiss. The last flames on the sea flickered out and the night was as dark as before.

We moved up close to the spot, playing our searchlight upon it, and lowered a small boat. The surface of the sea was calm.

Mme. Storey, Mr. Lyle and the engineer went in it. The sea was covered with floating wreckage. Aided by the light from the yacht, they picked it over piece by piece, but found no suggestion of anything human. We knew we wouldn't find anything, yet we lingered for half an hour.

When Mme. Storey came back up the ladder I stole a glance in her pale grave face. I was overjoyed to see she felt the same as I did. She was too big a woman to feel any jealousy because Death had cheated her of a personal triumph. Putting an arm around my shoulders, she murmured:

"How much better to have it end this way than before a gaping court room!"

Mr. Lyle instantly agreed, for reasons of his own, that it would be better for the world if the truth were never allowed to come out now. Consequently, when we got under way, we made a long detour over toward Narragansett in order to avoid meeting the boats that we knew must have put out from Newport to investigate the disaster. Thus we avoided giving any explanation of our presence on the scene.

WE returned to Brenton's Cove, where Mme. Storey and I were put ashore and Lyle's two men taken aboard. The yacht then carried them back to Providence. The owner's family never knew that she had been out on any other errand. If the shot was heard, it was ascribed to an automobile back-firing. The two drifting dinghies were towed out into the bay and sunk.

We found Catherine safe, and in attendance upon her mistress, pale-faced and tight-lipped as she had been before it all happened. It seemed that when the warning whistle had sounded, Reg-

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gie Margatt had unceremoniously dumped her ashore and rowed off to the Bonito. Catherine was never heard to speak of the matter afterward.

Mrs. Baxter had fetched Dr. Wickham to attend her husband. Baxter had been shot through the thigh; not a dangerous wound. By reason of his incapacity, Miss Betsy's car was useless to her for the time being, so Mme. Storey and I used it to make our getaway. When morning broke we were far across the boundaries of Rhode Island. We slept all day, and continued our journey the following night.

Thus Newport provided a second sensation close on the heels of the first. Only about a dozen souls knew of the connection between the two, and they never told. According to the story in the papers, Nick Van Tassel had been entertaining a small party of his intimate friends to dinner at Omega Farm. His guests were Ann Lewiston, Evelyn Surdam, Mary Burne, William Kipp and Reginald Margatt, Jr.

About ten o'clock somebody had suggested they go for a sail out to sea in Nick's express cruiser, the Bonito. As both the owner and young Kipp were experienced pilots and well used to engines, they had left the crew of the vessel ashore. They had done this before. At a point about ten miles south of Newport the Bonito had blown up from causes that would never be known, and had no doubt instantly sunk. The fire had been seen from the cliffs and word was telephoned to the police, but rescue boats had been unable to locate the spot until morning; and then nothing was to be found but a little floating wreckage. No bodies were ever recovered.

It was the prominence of the families concerned that made it a unique sensation. Much space was devoted to the victims' genealogies, and to accounts of their social triumphs. It was staggering to think of so many gilded scions being wiped out at one time. As for Nick Van Tassel, he bade fair to be enshrined forever as the premier patron of sport. The other Van Tassels discreetly kept the amount of his estate out of the papers, and the public still thinks of him in terms of millions.

It was Miss Betsy Pryer, the seemingly cynical and hard-boiled, who put up the good round sum that was considered necessary to insure the silence of the two detectives attached to Mr. Lyle's office, and the two men on Mr. Westervelt's yacht.

"What the devil!"—I can hear the deep voice bringing it out—"their families are not murderers. Why should the parents have to suffer for the sins of their offspring? There are enough scandals to tickle the ears of the mob without airing this one!"

Miss Betsy is still our very good friend. Mme. Storey has not been able to tempt her outside her walls, but we sometimes go to spend a week-end with her.

All that remained was for Mme. Storey and I to resuscitate ourselves as plausibly as possible. We spent a week motoring through the White Mountains and Canada, to give the affair time to die down a little. Then, in order to divert attention as far as possible from Newport, we discovered ourselves to the world in a Minneapolis hotel.

There was a tremendous furor, of course, but curiously enough, our coming back to life did not make so big a noise as our leaving it. The public seemed to feel a little cheated. Mme. Storey told the press the truth as far as she went. She said she had been en-

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gaged on a case that made it highly desirable for her to disappear for a while, and she had taken the accident of the fire as an opportunity to do so.

She refused all information about the case in question, and her story was not very well received. Her popularity no doubt dropped a great deal. However, everything is forgotten in time. The brilliant piece of work she did in connection with the murder of Ram Lal, the so-called crystal gazer, fully restored her in the public estimation.

THE END.

Buried Treasure of the Incas

THERE is probably no other place on earth with as much authentic buried treasure as in the northwestern part of South America, where the Incas lived. In Peru, modern homes are often built on old Incan buildings and much treasure has been found by tearing these down. Sometimes the Incas used soft gold and silver in fitting stones together.

Much gold, silver, and precious stones were thrown into lakes during religious ceremonies and to keep the Spaniards from stealing them. At Cuzco, the Incas threw all their gold into Lake Urcos when the Spaniards approached. This included a two-thousand-foot chain of solid gold with links a foot long and several inches thick, each of which was a load for a strong man. A five-million-dollar company was formed to drain the lake and recover the treasure, but it failed.

An old Indian woman, on her deathbed, told her kindly Spanish employer of another treasure, the only clew to which was an Indian word meaning "Lake of Two Stones." A lake with two prominent stones in it was found and drained, and the treasure located beneath one of the stones was sufficient to make all the searchers wealthy for life.

A Spanish captain adopted a wounded Indian lad. Later, when he had lost his money, the Indian offered to supply him with gold if he would keep it secret. He did so, and on their deaths a vault containing gold bars and Incan ornaments was found in the house. Another Indian was made godfather of a white child and, as was the custom, he presented the family with a gift of several bundles of wood. When these were opened each was found to contain a bag of gold dust and nuggets, but the Indian could not be found.

An Indian girl fell in love with a Spaniard and promised to make him the richest man in Peru if he would marry her. To prove it she blindfolded him and led him into the mountains where she showed him a vast treasure. On returning to the city he informed the authorities, but the girl and her family had already fled to escape torture.

Near Cuenca, Ecuador, is a legend of another treasure that is concealed in a cave closed by a giant granite arm which raises only on Good Friday. The treasure is in bags and, according to the story, if one takes only one bag he can get out all right, but if he is greedy and takes more the granite arm crushes him. The superstitious natives search for this hoard every Good Friday, but if any have found it, they were greedy. *E. R. McCarthy.*

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The Men Who Make The Argosy

HARL VINCENT

Author of "Beyond the Dark Nebula," "Red Twilight," etc.

BORN in Buffalo, New York, in 1893, I have spent most of my life moving from town to town, covering considerable portions of the States of New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. Am married and have two children, one a daughter of high school age, the other a strapping boy of six years.

Educated in Mechanical Engineering, my first positions were used to obtain experience in that line, though for one year I sidetracked into photography which has been a hobby with me for many years. In 1915 I became connected with one of the largest manufacturers of electrical equipment and am still in their employ. My specialty has been, and still is, the electric generating apparatus for steam power plants, especially large steam turbine units and the condensers that serve them. I was first engaged in the designing of such machinery, then in charge of shop and field tests, and finally in selling to the power companies and industries.

When supervising test work my duties carried me to most of the larger cities east of the Mississippi River as well as to a number of lonely spots where power plants are adjuncts of mines, refineries or powder factories. There were a number of years of such traveling, and it was mighty hard work. Selling the equipment is a far more pleasant task than testing it.

My first writing was strictly along the lines of my profession, including papers and discussions that were read before engineering societies, as well as articles for the technical publications. This rather naturally led to some attempts at fiction, and still more naturally to the writing of fantastic and pseudo-scientific stories. While my profession still occupies the greater portion of the daylight hours and has in nowise palled, I find the evening and week-end time spent at the typewriter a welcome relaxation and a growing interest.

In spite of the rejection slips, of which I have had my share, my fiction writing has brought me a great deal of pleasure and profit during the past five years. There is something highly gratifying in the contacts with editors and readers, something apart from and vastly more intimate than the cold mathematics and economics of the engineer. I only hope these contacts will continue, that they will become more numerous, and that, some day, I may be able to devote all my energies to writing as an avocation.

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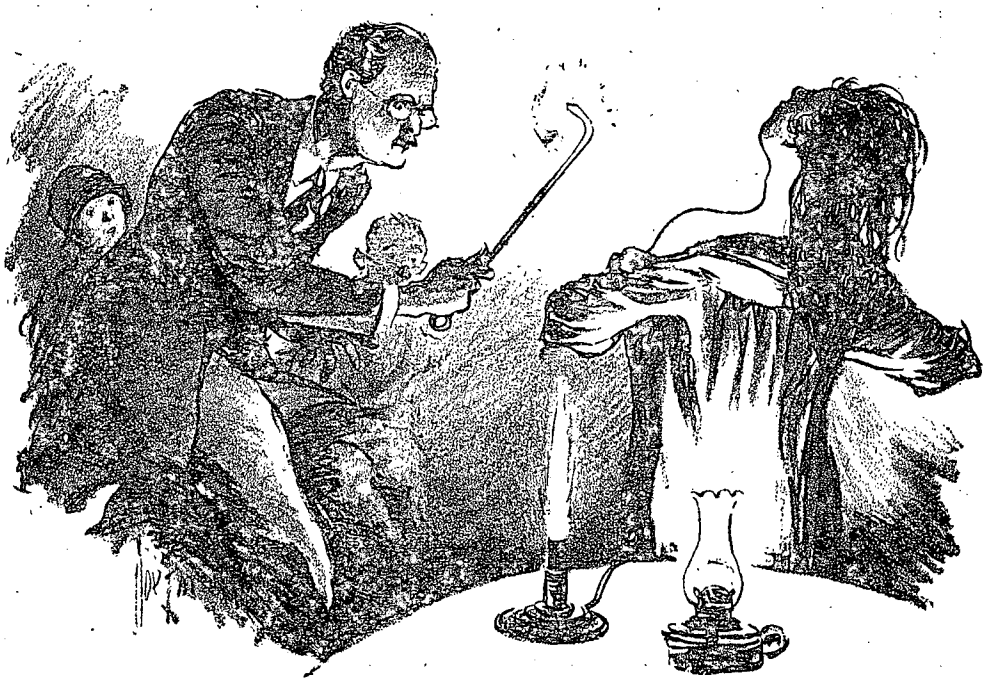
DO YOU READ DETECTIVE FICTION?



She motioned him to put the fiery iron to her heart!

Spook Crooks

A Startling Exposure of Fortune Tellers and Fake Mediums, Who Annually Rob the Public of More than $125,000,000!

A Feature Story

By Julien J. Proskauer

DR. CHARLES PURDY sat spellbound in his chair, his hands tightly clasping those of the others in the room who had come to witness and participate in the strange rites of the Sun Worshipers.

Mme. Lupe, the medium, suddenly caught him and led him to a table where lay a poker heated and glowing red. Her body half bared, Mme. Lupe was a weird sight. . . .

Read how Dr. Purdy lost a fortune and his sanity. Read this exposure of Mme. Lupe and her kind in the series of articles of which this one, appearing in next week's issue of DETECTIVE FICTION WEEKLY (September 19), is the first. Don't miss "Spook Crooks."

Read DETECTIVE FICTION WEEKLY—10c

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Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

TWO novelettes and three serials are suggested again:

Sea Gate, N. Y.

"Action Stories of Every Variety" is really a swell motto for ARGOSY. Your magazine goes with a *bang!* Your staff of writers are great. Some of the best are Theodore Roscoe, Gardner, Brent, Farley, H. Bedford-Jones, Worts, Tuttle, MacIsaac.

The best stories printed recently were "Chinese for Racket," "Out of the Silence," "Bentfinger," "The Grapevine Murders," "Helmet of Ranulf the Flame," "! A Gr-r-and an' Glorious Fourth!" "Blood of the Scanderoon," "Swordsmen of Florida," "M. P.," "Flying Racketeers," "Tail Spins," "Junked," "Rogue of the Movies," "Radio Pirates," "Missing," and "Five Mad Nights," which was great.

My favorite characters are *John Solomon, Peter the Brazen* (and *Susan*), *Vincent Connor, Bellow Bill Williams.* Please print another *Major Brane* story.

A suggestion: give us three serials and two novelettes!

MARTIN R. SIMON.

MERRITT fans—good news! We have just managed to get hold of a limited number of copies of "The Ship of Ishtar," which are for sale at the same price—one dollar, postpaid. So, first come, first served. Send your dollar to the Frank A. Munsey Co., 280 Broadway, New York.

ARGONOTES is as good as a story?

Bronx, N. Y.

I have been reading the ARGOSY off and on for two years and I haven't missed an issue in eight months.

My favorite characters are *Bill* and *Jim, Vincent Connor,* and *Gillian Hazeltine.* As many readers have remarked, *Jimmie Cordie* must be trying to get rid of China's surplus population.

My favorite authors are H. Bedford-Jones, Jack Allman, Robert Carse, Ray Cummings, John H. Thompson, J. E. Grinstead, E. S. Gardner and a host of others.

Print some more historical stories and comical ones. Paul Stahr is a great artist if he draws all those cover designs himself.

"Argonotes" is a great feature and is as good as a short story.

JOHN MULLERY.

"LET them be cranky":

New York City.

I like Brent's stuff best of all and I have tried to follow *Pete's* adventures in China. I hope to hear more from H. Bedford-Jones, too. Lieut. John Hopper is good also. I couldn't help from laughing at his man *Reilly.*

Please keep your book as it is. Some people like to be cranky, so let them be cranky. They make the world turn around.

FRANK J. PITTNAN.

A MEMBER of the ARGOSY club for life:

Oakland, Calif.

I started the ARGOSY on O. F. A. A. F. O. I am buying them for life, and I don't mean maybe. I like all the stories, but the best are the following: "Pay Dirt," "Fighter's Eyes," "Jan of the Jungle," "Circus Revenge," "At the Feet of Inam," "Dagger of El Haran," "The Devil's Checkerboard," "Beach Comber," "Bentfinger," and "The Grapevine Murders."

Your magazine, the ARGOSY, has a variety of stories which I like. I don't care to read a magazine of all one kind of stories.

JAMES FEELEY.

CALLS Seltzer our best author:

Akron, Ohio.

Twelve or thirteen years ago, I read a story. The author was Charles Alden Seltzer and the story was "The Stray Man." It was my first copy. Was I pleased? Well, if I were to keep each succeeding copy, I would need a special truck to haul them when we moved.

Do you know that Charles Alden Seltzer is the best writer you have? You needn't agree with me, but many of my friends, men and women in various professions, do. If I go to the pub-

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lic library for a second reading of one of his stories, the librarian invariably says, "They're all out." He captivates me by his descriptive artistic style.

You have on your staff many good writers, perhaps more versatile, such as MacIsaac, and so on. But their work is too lively and almost careless, though quite interesting.

Here is my pick in their order: Seltzer, Worts, MacIsaac, Footner, H. Bedford-Jones and a writer that I miss much—George M. Johnson.

JOHN LEWIS MESSICK.

"VOODOO'D" and "Bentfinger" rank high:

Brooklyn, N. Y.

I consider "Voodoo'd" and "Bentfinger" two of the best mystery stories I ever read. I am reading "The Grapevine Murders" and am enjoying it very much. Hope you will publish another *Peter the Brazen* story soon.

J. C. WITLIN.

MORE sea stories (how about Don Waters's "Whaling Blood"?):

Jamestown, R. I.

Find your magazine very interesting. Have been reading it for four years without missing an issue and I have liked every story. I have one request: that you give us more sea stories.

JACK FYFFE.

CASTS a vote for ARGOSY as is:

San Haven, N. D.

Haven't been reading ARGOSY for so very long, but I'm very much in favor of it already. Like *Peter the Brazen, Jimmie Cordie, Gillian Hazeltine, Captain Norcross,* and *Connor.* Yes, *Bill* and *Jim,* too. They're fine. And disregard the kickers and keep ARGOSY just as it is.

NEIL STORY.

"WHERE would our far-famed variety be, if—":

Taft, Calif.

I have been a constant reader of ARGOSY for at least twelve years. I also read DETECTIVE FICTION WEEKLY. I've read it beginning with the first copy, then *Flynn's.* I formerly read *Munsey's,* but am now reading RAILROAD MAN'S MAGAZINE. All of them have my heartiest congratulations and best wishes.

A "short story advocate" in May 16 issue says gangster stories are very tiresome, you can read about them in any newspaper. He says impossible stories are his favorite. Now impossible stories are also my favorite, but I realize that gangster stories may be the favorite of some one else, and if ARGOSY were to discontinue them where would our far-famed variety be? Besides, I read the ARGOSY for pleasure, entertainment and pastime, and I receive none of these by reading gangster articles in newspapers. Who can get pleasure from reading of murder and graft? In the ARGOSY stories, the right triumphs and wrong is punished, and the opposite is usually true in the newspapers.

Another reader in the same issue says that Kenneth Perkins's "Soda Mesa" stories were awful. My opinion is that Kenneth Perkins is a great writer. His stories have a depth that is hard for persons of mediocre intelligence to plumb. They have the majority of Western stories backed off the map. And his Creole mystery stories can't be beat.

WM. A. PEWITT, JR.

WANT a Mounty story? O. K.—watch for J. Allan Dunn's "White Rock Trail":

Rock Island, Ill.

I have read the ARGOSY for a number of years, but the June 6 issue can't be beat. Every story was a masterpiece.

I would like very much to see a story of the far North and the Mounted Police. "Forbidden Valley" and "The Devil's Checkerboard" are extra fine.

VERN K. LEMON.

CAME to ARGOSY through the old RAILROAD MAN'S MAGAZINE (which, you know, we are now publishing again—and a darned good magazine, if we do say it, who shouldn't!):

Ludington, Mich.

I first became acquainted with ARGOSY when the RAILROAD MAN'S MAGAZINE was consolidated with it. I was reading some stories in the RAILROAD MAN'S MAGAZINE and naturally followed them to ARGOSY, and for several years I was a constant reader of ARGOSY. I remember then that my pet "peeve" was one of the authors—Edgar Franklin—who I am glad to notice is absent from your columns now.

During the past year I have been reading ARGOSY again and I find it just as good a magazine as it used to be. One great attraction it has for me is the variety of stories. Some of my favorite stories are "Gambler's Throw," "Captain Judas," "The Prince of Peril," "Tama of the Light Country" ("Tama, Princess of Mercury" is going good, too), "Murder on the High Seas," "Jan of the Jungle," "The Crimson Trail," "The Devil's Checkerboard" and "The Pirate of Wall Street."

Now a few words about some of your authors.

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Eustace L. Adams comes too seldom to suit me. Fred MacIsaac is another top-notcher and so is H. Bedford-Jones. Kline, Cummings, Brent and Wirt are also very good.

PERCY E. MORSE.

ANOTHER Tuttle enthusiast speaks up:

Baton Rouge, La.

Hooray! I never was so glad in all my life as when I turned to "Looking Ahead" and saw notice of a story by W. C. Tuttle. By the way, where has he been hiding? I've read ARGOSY ever since I've been in high school, and it would break my heart if I missed one book. It's awfully hard to classify stories and see which ones you like best, but I've about decided that my favorites are those by Robert Carse and Theodore Roscoe.

Paul Stahr can't be beat. Why doesn't he paint a big picture that would rival the most famous painter of the day?

Leave the ARGOSY as it is. I haven't got a kick coming. I think some of the kickers need a kick in the pants. Didn't I chuckle when I read Pat Greene's snappy comeback with the kicker of his "Bracelets!" Kickers, leave the authors alone. I doubt if you could do as good as the worst. It would be like comparing a lead nickel with a good one according to value.

Three cheers for ARGOSY.

M. E. B.

DIDN'T like "Tom Thump," by Tip Bliss:

West Allis, Wis.

I've been reading this magazine for three years and enjoyed it all along until you put that story, "Tom Thump," by Bliss, in it. If you're going to keep putting such ham authors in, you'll degrade your magazine plenty. Listen, if you want to have a superior magazine put in more *Gillian Hazeltine* stories and futuristic stories.

My favorite authors are Wirt, Kline, Gardner, Bedford-Jones, Cummings, Worts, Merritt and Thompson.

A. G.

FOUND an 1800 clipping on the ship Lutine:

Los Angeles, Calif.

A few days after reading "The Bell of the Lutine," by Jack Allman, I chanced to read an old newspaper, the *Ulster County Gazette*, published at Kingston by Samuel Freer and Son, Saturday, January 4, 1800, which read in part:

"Two Spanish frigates, bound from the Havanna, having on board upward of three million and a half dollars, beside merchandize, were taken on the 16th of October (1799), by four British frigates, and safely carried into Plymouth.

"The British frigate Lutine, of thirty-nine guns, was lost on the 9th of October (1799), on the banks of the outer Fly Island passage. She had on board near a half million; two hundred thousand pounds was insured, and was bound for Texel. She was to have proceeded to Hamburgh, to clear the commercial failures in that city. The crew perished except two."

I wish to compliment Mr. Allman on his story of the Lutine and his last serial, "Under the Polar Ice." Both were good.

Would like to hear again from Don Waters and more of A. Leslie; also from Wilson Collison and his *Bill Buddy* stories.

As a whole, the magazine is very pleasing and entertaining.

J. N. BECKNER.

BETTER than higher priced magazines:

Marion, Ind.

It is my opinion that the ARGOSY is much better than higher priced magazines. My favorite characters are *Peter the Brazen, Hazeltine,* the *Fighting Yid, Jimmie Cordie,* and the *Boston Bean.* Let us have some war, flying, Secret Service, and baseball stories.

BILL MORGAN.

San Francisco, Calif.

I am sending along ten coupons for an ARGOSY drawing. After trying all kinds of magazines, I am convinced that ARGOSY is by far the best in its field for any price.

Please give us more stories like "Captain Judas," by F. V. W. Mason. That was some story. It beats any magazine story I have ever read, barring none. And I have read plenty.

"Bentfinger," by Theodore Roscoe, and "Speed-Storm," by Barre Lyndon, are close seconds.

The pen and ink drawings at the top of some stories are terrible. The ones that went with "Captain Judas" were an example. Paul Stahr is wonderful and the more covers he paints the better ARGOSY will be.

CURTIS W. PENDERGAST.

A WORD of praise from far-off Australia:

Home Hill, North Queensland, Australia.

Just a word of praise from "Aussie" for your magazine. I think it is the best magazine published that finds its way out here. Of course it is a month or so old when we get it, but we receive three copies at a time. Some of the yarns are over the odds, especially fantastic, which I don't like, "yet some of the family do." I like all Western yarns, as I read and I can lay hands on. Just finished "Barons of the Border,"

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which was O. K. with us. Also like *Gillian Hazeltine*. In fact, we read all yarns printed between the covers; some growl at, but read just the same.

We do a lot of irrigation here and your magazine helps to while away the hours watching the water. I read with interest you were having a yarn called "The Bush Pirate" in your next. So I hope it is a little better than one you published some time back about Australia. Wyman Sydney Smith, the author of it, did not know what he was talking about.

J. HARRIS.

"THE Grapevine Murders" rang the bell:

Toledo, Ohio.

"The Grapevine Murders," by Worts, is the best *Gillian Hazeltine* story I have read. His "Murder on the High Seas" is a close second.

Let's have some more stories by Kline. His are always good. MacIsaac's "Pirate of Wall Street" was excellent. Why don't you have more stories like "The Radio Gun-Runners," "Tama of the Light Country," and "Maza of the Moon"? They were excellent. Try and get more "Darkness" stories by Leinster. They were very good.

BURTON ANDREWS.

YOUR CHOICE COUPON

Editor, ARGOSY,
280 Broadway, N. Y. C., N. Y.

The stories I like best in this issue of the magazine are as follows:

1.....

2.....

3.....

4.....

5.....

Name.....

Street.....

City.....*State*.....

Fill out coupons from 10 consecutive issues and get an ARGOSY drawing (not the cover painting) for framing.

This coupon not good after December 5.

9-12

Looking Ahead!

THE FIGHTING PRODIGAL

The powerful interests stealing a Wisconsin logging company didn't stop at murder to block a young lumberjack's bold comeback.

By ROBERT E. PINKERTON

THE BURNING ROAD

A different story of the Foreign Legion—how a hard-boiled driver of an armored car went A. W. O. L. in Arab territory.

By ROBERT CARSE

DIPLOMACY BY AIR

Connor beards a Chinese war lord

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

MEXICAN CRUDE

Taming a boom town below the border

By WILLIAM E. BARRETT

COMING TO YOU IN THE ARGOSY OF SEPTEMBER 19th

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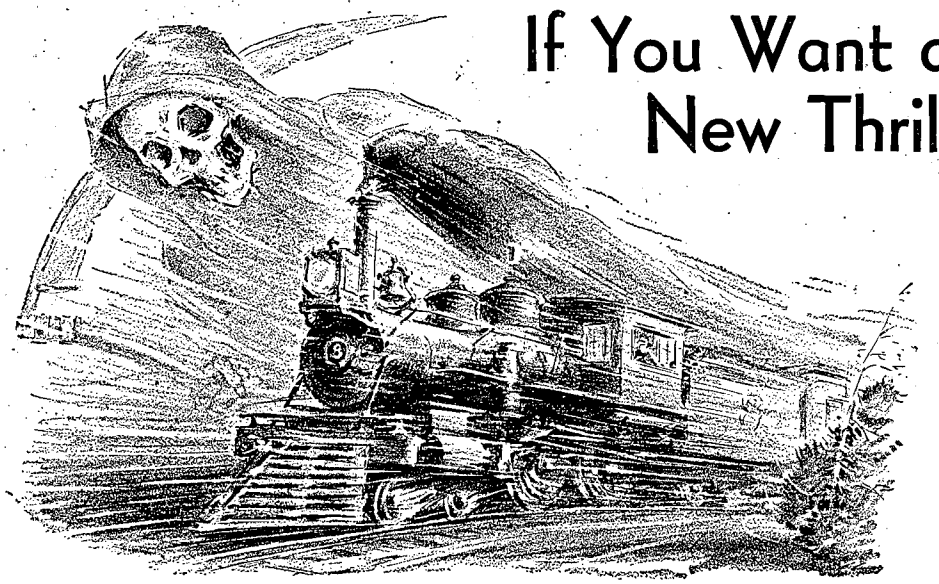

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Read Si Stoddard's Greatest Love Story

"BURNING MOUNTAIN"

in September Railroad Man's Magazine

Jimmy Shaw Wasn't Much to Look at, but When He Stole an Engine and Drove It into a Forest Flaming with Red Death, Plenty of Things Started to Happen. A Tale of Sublime Devotion and Tense Excitement, unlike Anything Else You've Ever Read!

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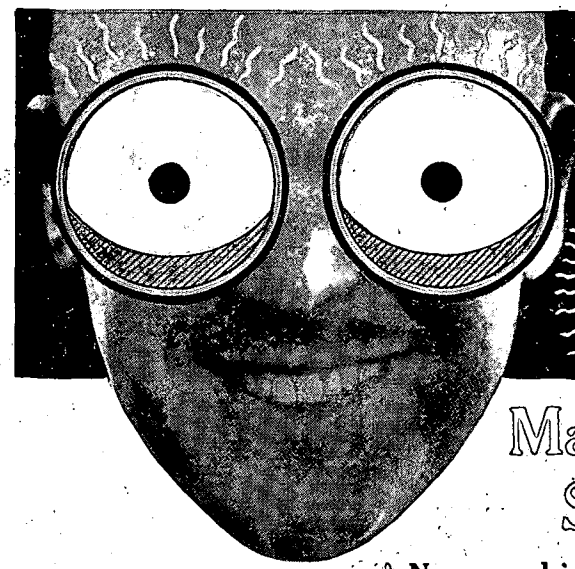
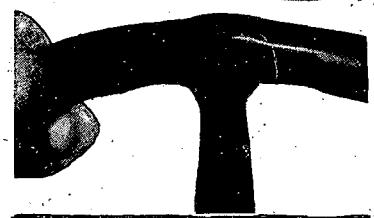
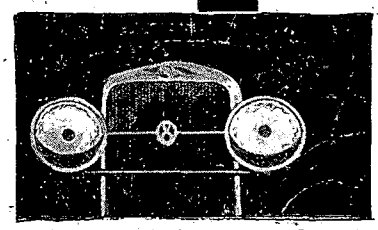


NEW KIND OF AUTO EYES

Makes Night Driving Safer Than Day!

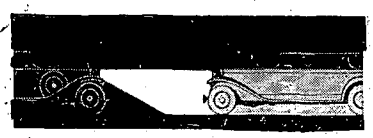
No more driving "blind" on a crowded highway at night! An astonishing new invention banishes night wrecks and smashups. Ends fear of running over children or animals. Mail coupon quick for the manufacturer's introductory Free Test Offer.





This new kind of Light even LOOKS entirely different. No wonder every installation brings a dozen more sales.

Lights up entire roadway, including ditches at side. Gives perfect illumination without shadows or flickering.



Banishes Glare Shields, Spot Lights, etc. Floods the road with light, yet absolutely cannot glare.

FITS ANY HEADLIGHT—ENDS DANGEROUS DIMMING—DOUBLES ROAD LIGHT!

AT LAST! An amazingly queer yet simple invention lifts the bane and curse of night driving from the motoring world. Actually like magic this altogether new discovery replaces the "bulbs" in automobile headlights with truly amazing results. Road illumination is instantly doubled, yet glare is absolutely banished. Ordinary objects in the road, ruts, animals, obstructions, etc., are made clearly visible at least **three** times as far. Even cuts, right through fog, mist, rain and snow. Gives you a solid wall of light 3 feet high, 25 to 30 feet wide. Instead of ordinary "direct" light, this beam is composed entirely of double-*reflected or "infused" light. This new* kind of beam pours down the highway ahead of you so far that you can actually see to go 70 miles an hour in safety. At a 40 to 50 mile an hour clip, it is positively safer than daylight because all the light is on the road and you see nothing of your surroundings to distract you.

INEXPENSIVE

Patent rights in this new lighting invention are fully protected. It is not in any sense a new "attachment." There is no wiring or installation. No extra up-keep. In the past, millions of motorists have paid from $10 to $25 for so-called spot-lights and driving-lights that at best are only make-shifts. This new method costs only a fraction as much and actually **doubles** road illumination with your present headlights! Cuts through the other fellow's light so you can see the road, yet absolutely cannot glare in his eyes. No wonder fleet owners, manufacturers, taxi and bus lines, etc., concerns like Blue and Gray Bus Line, W. Va., Wallace & Tiernan, N. J., Columbus Fire Trucks, etc., are fast turning to this discovery as standard equipment. It's positively needed on every car in America, new or old **right this minute.**

Offered On Introductory Test

Every driver who ever rolled half-blind down the highway at night knows exactly what such an invention means in added speed, nervous energy saved, perhaps fatal accidents banished. To prove as quickly as possible to motorists in every section what this invention will do, the manufacturer now makes a liberal FREE TEST OFFER. Simply mail the coupon for details. No obligation. **Send it today.**

HACHMEISTER-LIND CO.
Dept. M-150 - PITTSBURGH, PA.

Agent Makes $1,400 In One Week

Full-time and spare-time workers. New FREE DEMONSTRATION Plan with SALES GUARANTEED; EXCLUSIVE TERRITORY. Sell in bunches to fleet owners. A real *chance for $8 to $14 very first hour;* $6,000 to $10,000 a year. Wehner, Pa., made $1,125 in 90 days' spare time; Owens, W. Va., made $500 a month; Davis of Pa., made $1,400 in one week. No limit for distributors. Use coupon for full details of money-making proposition. It's red-hot! ACT NOW!

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Rush details of your Free Test Offer; *also facts about agent's money-making* opportunities without obligation.

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